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COBALT-SERIES

マリア様がみてる

マーガレットにリボン

今野緒雪

集英社

Volume 31

Marguerite Ribbon

Prologue

"Gokigenyou."

"Gokigenyou."

The clear morning greeting travels through the serene, blue sky.

Today, once again, the maidens that gather in the Virgin Mary's garden smile purely to one another as they pass under the tall gateway.

Wrapping their innocent bodies and souls is a deep-colored school uniform.

Walking slowly so as to not disturb the pleats in their skirts, so as to not toss their white sailor scarves into disarray... such is the standard of modesty here. Running here because one is in danger of missing class, for instance, is too undignified a sight for students to wish upon themselves.

Lillian Private Academy for Women.

Founded in Meiji 34, this academy was originally intended for the young women of nobility, and is now a Catholic academy of prestigious tradition. Placed in downtown Tokyo, where you can still see traces of Musashi Field's greenery, it is protected by God, a garden where maidens can receive tutelage from pre-school to university.

Time passes, and even now, in Heisei, three era-names past Meiji, it is a valuable academy, where nurtured ladies raised in greenhouses are shipped out in carefully packaged boxes after 18 years of schooling - an arrangement that continues to survive.

"Marguerite."

A perennial plant from the daisy family.

Originating from the Canary Islands. Cultivated primarily for its appearance.

In the language of flowers, it has many meanings.

A fortune-telling flower.

Sincerity.

– And, also, honest friendship.

Marguerite Ribbon 1

"Are those Marguerite daisies?"

Shimako-san said, as they entered into the clubroom.

It was Monday. After school. On the second floor of the Rose Mansion.

The exhaustion from yesterday's trip to the amusement park, plus the six hours of class today, had left them pretty frazzled. "Ah, who are you kidding, it was fun," Yumi thought to herself.

"Indeed. The flowers do look like Marguerite daisies, don't they?"

Yoshino-san giggled. What kind of response was that from someone who'd asked the exact same question when she first saw what Yumi was carrying when they met in the classroom that morning.

"But since you said that, they must be something else."

Shimako-san placed her bag down on a chair then leaned in close to the bouquet of "Marguerite daisy lookalikes" that Yumi had just finished placing in a glass vase and inhaled their scent.

"Ah."

Then, the answer that slowly came was –

"They're Garland chrysanthemums."

Correct.

"Incredible, Shimako-san. You really know your flowers."

Yoshino-san looked at Shimako-san with a touch of respect.

"Neither Touko-chan nor Noriko-chan got it right."

Hearing their names called, the two first-years momentarily stopped preparing the tea and turned around, but soon returned to work.

"Well, it was the smell of them ... It reminded me of a sukiyaki hot-pot."

So that was it. Perhaps her first memory of that plant was of eating the leaves in a sukiyaki hot-pot. It was an adult taste, the smell was quite strong.

"Shimako-san, do you like chrysanthemum leaves?"

"Yeah."

"I knew it."

Despite her tender age, Shimako-san had a preference for adult or, rather, bitter food, such as ginkgo nuts, edible threeleaf arrowhead and lily bulbs. The complete opposite of Yumi's onee-sama, Ogasawara Sachiko-sama.

"So then, why do we have these chrysanthemum flowers?"

Shimako-san asked.

"Yumi-san brought them from home."

The response was provided by Yoshino-san before Yumi had a chance to speak. But rather than explaining fully, Yoshino-san said what she wanted to say then slyly passed the baton to Yumi, saying, "Right?" Yumi had no choice but to provide the follow-up.

"My mother grows them on our verandah. When they're tender, she'll pick them and we'll have them in a hotpot from time to time. But, now that it's March, we don't have hotpots all that often."

So without constant attention they'd become overgrown, and had then bloomed. Usually they wouldn't bloom until May or June, but they'd been in such a warm, sunny spot. Their verandah.

"They'd been decorating our classroom until recently, then I thought they'd go well in the Rose Mansion too, so I took about a third from the vase and brought them here."

"Ahh, is that so."

Shimako-san smiled in agreement.

The room was currently adorned with vases containing roses that had been left over from the third-years' send-off, and they were still looking healthy, but the Marguerite daisies, or, more accurately, Garland chrysanthemums, added a different aesthetic that looked wonderful.

Flowers are good, no matter their type. Add them to a room and it becomes brilliant.

Nonetheless, the more Yumi looked at them, the more they resembled Marguerite daisies. If you only caught a quick glimpse, the impression of yellow rather than white was probably more pronounced. While the petals of

Marguerite daisies were entirely white, the petals of Garland chrysanthemums had a yellow coloring where they met the stem.

"The Marguerite daisy is also called the Garland chrysanthemum tree, so it's not surprising they look so similar."

Yumi and Yoshino-san responded with, "He-y, really?" and, "Knowledgeable as ever, Shimako-san," to this comment. It apparently also had other names, like the "Grove of German camomile." Who knew?

"Well then."

With that statement, Yumi, Yoshino-san and Shimako-san took their seats.

"Shall we start?"

Slowly, they reached into their bags and placed the items they had brought from home in the middle of the table.

Lined up was a single issue of B5-sized magazine, a small plastic bag with a character drawn on it containing seven boxes of candy and numerous ribbons of various colors.

"It feels like something's not quite right, don't you think?"

"You thought so too?"

"It feels like there's a much better idea lurking out there."

So the, "Shall we start?" was a non-starter. While they lingered, Noriko-chan and Touko brought out tea, placing one tea-cup in front of each of the three people.

Three tea-cups. The two first-years didn't sit down, instead asking a question of the three second-years.

"Will there be anything else?"

"No. Thank-you."

"Then is it alright if we leave ahead of you?"

"Yes. Thanks for your hard work."

The first-year duo said a farewell gokigenyou, then quietly opened the door and departed.

"That's thoughtful of them."

Yoshino-san said, as she sipped her tea.

"Or maybe they're just well trained."

As the onee-samas of Touko and Noriko-chan, Yumi and Shimako-san giggled, both embarrassed and proud of this praise for their petit soeurs.

"But if it were me, and my onee-sama was talking about giving a present to a junior other than me, I'd be shrieking."

That's probably true.

The three future Roses had not gathered for a regular meeting, or even a special meeting, in connection with their Yamayurikai work, but for something far more personal.

White Day was not far away. They were meeting to discuss reciprocal gifts for people they had received chocolates from but weren't especially close to. This was their third meeting on this topic.

The first meeting had taken place last week, as they were standing in the school corridor chatting.

It started with, "You received chocolates from people other than your petit soeur?" then moved on to, "What should we do about return gifts?" and "If there was a difference in return gifts between the three of us, it'd leave a bad taste, don't you think?" before ending with, "Then I suppose we should go shopping together."

The second meeting was yesterday at the amusement park.

After watching the fireworks, as they were starting to make their preparations to leave, Yumi had a flash of inspiration and asked, "Anyway, since we're here, why don't we buy cookies or candy or something?" With that, they returned to the souvenir shop and each of them purchased enough for their own return gifts.

And so, the third meeting was today.

Since it would be somewhat insipid to hand over the purchased candy as is, they decided they should at least wrap the presents themselves and had brought along ribbons from home. Unfortunately, none of them had any new

wrapping paper, so they'd have to do something about that. It just felt like something was not quite right.

"It's no big deal, but they left because they didn't want to get in our way."

She was still talking about the first-years. It looked like Yoshino-san was envious of their petit soeurs, after all.

"Outstanding."

That's it.

Unable to come up with a good plan for wrapping the candy, Yoshino-san had fled to a different topic of conversation. She continued to mumble heartily as she flipped through the magazine.

"They'll both be like Mizuno Youko-sama when they're seniors."

Debut

As I furthered my education into university, I thought about changing my personality, to see what that would be like.

It wasn't as though I disliked who I was, or my life had become troublesome, or anything like that.

It wasn't really for any particular reason.

Maybe I was just getting a bit tired of it.

Upon reflection, it seemed like I'd been playing the role of the "accommodating honors student" for a very long time – from the time I first parted from my parents to join society at large in kindergarten. So my connection to that identity stretched back about 12 or 13 years. It was a good fit for me, but regrettably it just went on for too long.

People amend their personality countless times over the course of their life, and occasionally they have the opportunity to change it completely. Like when they have to change schools after moving interstate, or when they enter into university, or start a new job. Starting a new life in an environment where nobody knows who you have been up until that point provides that chance.

Yet I'd graduated from high school without being able to do that.

When I entered into primary school, I'd been so young that I hadn't considered changing my personality.

My best chance probably came when I passed the entrance exam for, and was accepted into, a private middle school, as there were hardly any of my former classmates from primary school there. But following the recommendation of Torii Eriko, who later became my dear friend, I accepted the position of class representative to the student council, and any departure from that identity was stifled. But thinking about it now, even being the "indifferent class representative" or the "mocking class representative" would have been better. I'd been under the mistaken impression that a class representative had to act as some kind of mediator in the class, so naturally I

regulated my behavior. It was still a mystery to me how my personality had been so apparent to Eriko, who hadn't even been a passing acquaintance of mine at the time.

High school was a continuation of middle school, so I was constantly surrounded by people I knew. Suddenly changing my personality would result in me being told "You're acting strange today, Youko-san," and then being taken to the school infirmary.

So I decided to turn over a new leaf, and show a different me to the new friends I made at university.

But having said that, it's no simple task to create a new personality from scratch. I decided to sample the people closest to me, and start by imitating them. The idiosyncrasies of any one person would be too much, so I went with a mixture of two people.

The nonchalance of my dear friend Satou Sei, and the friendliness of my darling grand petit soeur, Fukuzawa Yumi-chan.

Still, it didn't go as well as I'd imagined.

"Umm, Mizuno-san."

At lunchtime, as I was eating Set Meal B in the cafeteria, two of my classmates approached me.

"Did you go to the first-period maths lecture?"

If there had been any vulnerable male students nearby, they may have got the mistaken impression that, "Those girls like me." But their cute wave had absolutely no effect on me.

"I did, why do you ask?"

I'd spent the six years of middle and high school at an all-girls school. I had a fair idea what these girls were going to say next.

"Sorry about this, but can I take a copy of your notes?"

See, there it is.

" ... I guess that's okay."

I set down my chopsticks, took my notebook out of my largish shoulder bag and handed it over. Belatedly, I remembered to put on my smiling face. Friendly, friendly.

"Waa - you saved me. I'll copy it during the lunch break then give it back to you in class."

The two girls hastily exited the cafeteria. I looked at the clock. It was 15 minutes until the end of the lunch break.

In order to snap the half-awake students to attention, the professor had packed the first-period maths class densely with material, so my notes covered about four pages and mainly consisted of equations and graphs. There was no way those two would be able to transcribe all that in the remaining time.

(Obviously, photocopy.)

I let out a small sigh. If you're going to borrow my notebook until the next maths class, how about at least writing it in your own book? Or show up to class without makeup on, instead of spending so much time diligently applying cosmetics.

(Quit it.)

I hated my tendency to waver about these kind of things.

If it was going to annoy me, then I shouldn't lend people my notebook. If I'm going to lend people my notebook, then don't complain. I'm going to all this effort trying to change my personality. So why am I still the serious honors student?

And if I was supposed to be using Sei as my model, she probably wouldn't be the one lending the book, but the one borrowing it.

(Borrowing ... ?)

No, that would be pointless. Skipping out on a class for no reason would just increase my stress. I stirred the remaining seaweed in vinegar with my chopsticks.

"Mizuno-san."

Hearing my name called, I looked up and saw a different classmate of mine seated across the table from me.

"You were in the first-period maths class, right?"

"Ah, if you want my notebook, it's currently – "

I remembered just after I'd said that. She'd been in the classroom during first period as well.

"No, I was there. So I don't need to copy your notebook."

Short, wavy hair and black glasses on a face free from makeup. Her physical appearance was completely different, but for some reason she left a similar impression to Yumi-chan.

"You're always there, Mizuno-san. At every class. Even when they're not taking attendance, first period, fifth period, a perfect attendance record."

Talking about perfect attendance when it's still only May, I thought to myself as I struggled to come up with a response.

"I'm aware of that."

She had a perfect attendance record too. From memory, her name was Kawatou-san. She smiled as she said:



"Right. Diligence itself is admirable."

Kawatou-san counted on her fingers.

"There's also Himura-san and Tokunaga-san. Since all four of us are so diligent, why don't we become friends?"

The other two were also women. It seemed like there was also a guy with a perfect attendance record, but it seemed kind of pitiful to have four girls and only one guy, so I wasn't going to mention it.

"... Okay?"

As I answered, I remembered. The sort of people that Himura-san and Tokunaga-san were.

Right, right. Despite Himura-san's eye-catching appearance, with an artistic hairstyle that could almost be called an afro and quite extreme make-up and fashion, she spoke with a quiet, subdued voice. Tokunaga-san had a rough appearance, always wearing masculine jeans and T-shirts. She never wore any makeup, and her face looked like a boy's, but she'd never be mistaken for a man because of her long hair that she wore in a ponytail and her surprisingly large breasts for such a slender frame.

"Great. It's a bit sudden, but how about today? Third period's your last, right? After that, at a cafe out front of the train station."

Kawatou-san said the name of the shop was "Mole Cafe 2" but, sadly, I'd never heard of it.

"I'll draw you a quick map later."

"Thanks."

It probably would have been better if I walked with her to this place, but apparently we were all going to meet there.

"Since we're such a diligent group, there's no alcohol. The drinking age is 20. And since we're studying law, it wouldn't be right for us to break the law, you know. Ah, unless you've already reached the legal drinking age, Mizuno-san?"

"No, I'm still underage."

"I see. You seem so calm and collected that I thought you might be older."

Calm and collected, huh. It looked like I was a long way from becoming Satou Sei or Fukuzawa Yumi.

"I guess we should make a reservation for the cafe."

"Ah, I'll leave that up to you then, sorry."

Back in high school, I would have offered to help out in some way, but this time around I firmly resisted.

"It's okay, don't worry about it. I'm used to that kind of thing."

"That kind of thing?"

"Being an organizer or committee member. Those kind of roles always seem to fall to me."

It looked like Kawatou-san was my compatriot, in some regards.

"Well, I've got to go. I have to talk to Himura-san and Tokunaga-san too."

"If ... "

If you just wait ten minutes, you'll see them in class and you won't have to go looking for them, was what I was going to say to Kawatou-san, but she'd already left. Since they were so diligent, Himura-san and Tokunaga-san wouldn't miss the next class. Probably.

The 'Mole Cafe 2' near the train station was underground. Right beside a florist there was a flight of stairs leading down to a door decorated with vines. When the quartet had fully assembled, we entered the store. However.

"Huh?"

The cafe was full. We'd arrived in time for 3 o'clock tea-time, and the cafe was full of older ladies leisurely chatting as they had tea and cake. Mole Cafe 2 had about ten tables that could seat four people.

"But I made a reservation."

Kawatou-san desperately pleaded.

"Kawatou-san, Kawatou-san ... Here it is. Four people, at 5:00."

The male employee said, looking through the reservation book.

"Not 5:00, 15:00. I said 3pm."

15:00 and 5:00. It was probably hard to tell the difference over the phone. A simple mistake. If they'd bothered to repeat the time to confirm it – well, no point saying anything about that now.

"5:00 ... hmm."

"I have a part-time job as a tutor in the evening."

The vibe coming from Himura-san and Tokunaga-san was to reschedule. I didn't really care either way, but Kawatou-san looked like she was about to burst into tears so, against my better judgment, I spoke up.

"But we wouldn't have to wait until 5:00, I'm sure a space will open up sooner or later. After all, this place isn't by-reservation only."

Luckily, there weren't any other customers waiting to be seated. Ten tables is ten tables, and it's hard to think that they'd all stay there for an hour, let alone two. And there were customers that had already finished their cakes.

"Since we came all the way here, why don't we wait a while? Tokunaga-san, what time did you have to leave?"

"5pm I guess... Alright, I'll stay a bit longer."

After Tokunaga-san said this, Himura-san nodded slightly and said, "Okay," too.

"Thank-you."

Then I turned to the employee from before and said:

"Excuse me, is it alright if we take a look at the menu while we wait?"

This was done to optimize the limited time we had, but it was probably overkill. Even if I hadn't asked, Kawatou-san surely would have.

My reading of the situation had been correct, and within ten minutes we were led to a table. Since we'd already looked over the menu, the ordering process went smoothly, so in the end we didn't lose much time. Also, we were given a free plate of cookies by the manager as an apology for the mix up, and at that point we all agreed we were glad we stayed.

"I wonder if I could take mine with me."

Tokunaga-san wrapped up three of the small cookies in a paper napkin.

She'd ordered a cake-set, so it didn't appear as though she disliked sweets. Besides, if she didn't like them, she'd probably offer them to everyone else instead of taking them home as a souvenir.

"To eat with your students?"

I asked. If so, I was going to offer her my share of the cookies as well.

"Students?"

Tokunaga-san repeated.

"From here, you're going to your job as a tutor, right?"

"Ah, right. Yeah. You've got a good memory, Mizuno-san."

This response didn't feel all that inviting. It was probably better not to probe into this topic too deeply – at least, that's what I thought.

"What are you tutoring? How many students do you have? Boys? Girls?"

Kawatou-san's interest had been piqued and she fired off a barrage of questions. I didn't know what she wanted to be in the future – probably an attorney or a prosecutor – but just imagining her in a courtroom was draining.

"Ah, it's not that interesting."

The accused, Tokunaga-san, gently deflected the question.

"I!"

Himura-san suddenly spoke. When she said this it was such a departure from her usual silence or subdued voice that it was hard to believe it actually came from Himura-san's mouth.

"I mispronounce words."

"Huh?"

Myself, Kawatou-san and Tokunaga-san looked at each other. Our conversation stopped and, consequently, I noticed that the cafe was playing classical music in the background.

"Mispronounce?"

But why say that now, all of a sudden. Perhaps that's why she'd only ever spoken in a barely audible voice before now.

"I think I'm speaking standard Japanese, but to locals it sounds like I'm mispronouncing things."

Hearing this relatively long sentence reminded me of something.

"You're from the Tohoku region?"

"Exactly. See, you can tell, right?"

Himura-san said she was born and raised in Akita. Her soft-spoken manner was apparently a result of her complex about the way she talked. Her grandmother had helped raise her and everyone talked with that regional accent in her house, so much so that she even stood out amongst her peers at her local high school.

"So when it came time for me to move here, I talked with my friends about how to avoid having city students look down at me. Anyway, some fashion magazine said that perms were the in thing, so I thought that would be the way to go. But when I actually got here, everyone looked surprisingly plain. Even so, it'd still seem unnatural if I suddenly changed my hairdo and my wardrobe. And I was afraid of speaking, so I couldn't make any friends, and had no-one to turn to for advice."

Himura-san gathered pace as she spoke, until she was going all out at the end. Midway through she blew her nose on a paper napkin, and I took a pack of tissues out of my bag and offered them to her.

"Ahh—, I feel so much better after getting that off my chest."

"Have you come to a decision?"

"Yeah. When I get my monthly allowance from my parents, I'm going to a hairdresser. This fashion's a bit over-the-top. As for my accent, as long as I can make myself understood, it's fine."

Exactly. It had only taken her a one month detour to arrive at this truth.

"— so thanks for your help and I hope we get along well in the future."

With her second debut over, Himura-san smiled, her face showing the relief she had spoken of. She proved to be so charming and fascinating that it

was hard to believe she was the same person as the soft-spoken, introverted girl.

"I should be heading off soon."

Tokunaga-san got up from her chair.

It was still only 4:45, but our conversation had reached a natural pause. It's always hard to leave when a conversation's in full flight.

"Ahh, my part of the bill."

Scanning the bill, Tokunaga-san opened her purse. A sign saying, "One bill per table," hung beside the register.

"Hmm, I wonder if this includes tax."

I heard Tokunaga-san mumble to herself and answered, mainly by reflex.

"Ah, it says tax not included."

"Oh, where's that?"

"It's in the fine-print on the menu."

At which point the other three had a curious expression on their faces.

"... Very perceptive."

Tokunaga-san put some more money on the table, then I gave her the correct change from the coins I had in my purse.

"Geeze, Mizuno-san."

"Huh?"

"Were you a treasurer or something?"

Since you're so good at this, Himura-san was saying.

"... I used to help out with things like that, a little bit."

I left it intentionally vague. It wasn't a total lie. In my third-year of high school, I had been a president of the school council, but there had been two other people with me, and we'd all shared the jobs of treasurer and secretary. Plus we'd received help from our juniors, our petit soeurs, so it's not like I'd done the job of a treasurer all by myself.

"Well then, I'll leave you here."

Kawatou-san waved as Tokunaga-san walked away.

"Give our regards to your students."

"Uhh."

This startled Tokunaga-san just as she was opening the door, and she turned around.

"Surely it would be troubling for her students to get greetings from people they've never met."

I pinned Kawatou-san's hand down.

"Ah, right."

With my eyes I urged Tokunaga-san to pay no attention to it and go, but standing in front of the door she found it hard to leave for some reason. Just as we were all starting to wonder why, she rushed back to the table and asked us:

"How do I look to you?"

"Huh?"

The remaining three of us looked at each other.

"What's your first impression of me, what kind of person do you think I am, that kind of thing."

"How do you look?"

How can anyone answer that question so quickly (and today was a big day for sudden announcements).

"Boyish, cool, good-looking."

"Intellectual, imperturbable, I suppose."

"Someone who wouldn't lose out to the men."

Himura-san, myself and Kawatou-san said what we thought.

"Is that so? Then I guess it's a success."

"What is?"

"Ah, nothing."

Tokunaga-san said, then turned once more and headed for the exit, but there's no way that 'Ah, nothing' was a suitable answer to that question.

"Plus, a mystery."

Himura-san muttered, concealed by the noise of Tokunaga-san closing the door. I shared her sentiments.

"How we're seen, how we want to be seen, and what type of person we are. Those three things aren't always aligned."

Kawatou-san said, her eyes drooping. She used her spoon to stir the cooled coffee in her cup. Her face lowered almost to the table. She looked as though she was drunk, but she'd followed her own declaration about not breaking the law and hadn't had any alcohol. The cream in the cake had a tiny bit of liqueur in it for flavoring, but it would be quite the feat to get drunk from that.

"You might not have noticed, but I'm not very good at organizing people or involving myself with them."

"I thought you said you were used to that kind of thing?"

Like a committee member, or an organizer. She'd said something about those roles usually falling to her.

"That was taken from my friend's life. She was beautiful, but she had no interest in being trendy, and was a natural leader. I always wanted to be like her. We lived in the same neighborhood, so we went to the same schools from elementary school through to high school and I thought we'd go to the same university too, but she failed the entrance exam to our uni. It was the only one I passed. I was forlorn, it felt like the gods were saying that we had to separate. And so, I don't know what came over me, but I thought that I could become her. I'd been watching her for twelve years, so I should be able to imitate her. But it was impossible. I'm going to reset too."

Kawatou-san smiled, raising both hands in surrender. There was no doubt she had been influenced by Himura-san.

"Still."

I said.

"You shouldn't force yourself to change, but you shouldn't give up on something just because it's hard at the start, right?"

I didn't think it was necessarily bad to make an effort to change when you had a role model you wanted to be more like.

"Mizuno-san, you're like a teacher."

Himura-san smiled. Damn it. I'd switched into lecture mode.

The lights were turned down and the background music switched to jazz. The whole mood of the cafe changed. By the looks of things, it turned into a licensed venue in the evenings. I noticed that at some point the groups of old ladies had left and been replaced by young people sitting at tables alone or in twos.

Just as we were sensing that we should be leaving soon too, the door opened and a customer entered.

"Ah, you're still here."

It was Tokunaga-san, who had left the cafe not long ago, and when she spotted us she smiled and made her way over to the table.

"Ah, umm."

We were thrown into confusion. Tokunaga-san shouldn't have appeared, since she was supposed to be on her way to her tutoring job. But on her return, there was obviously something different about the woman that had departed less than an hour ago.

She was accompanied by two children, holding onto one with each hand. At a guess, I'd say the boys were three and one years old.

They were obviously too young to need a tutor. Well, there were parents that had tutors for their children right from when they were babies, but –

"Is your job babysitting?"

Kawatou-san inquired. Tokunaga-san shook her head, then lined it up beside the bigger boy's.

"I suppose I'm guilty of perjury. Or at least misrepresentation."

They looked so alike it was funny. The boy looked puzzled.

"Tokunaga-san, you're a mother!?"

"Yep. My parents live close by, so my mother looks after them on weekdays. There's my husband too, but he's a regular office worker and

doesn't get home until the evening. But repeatedly explaining that to uni students five or six years younger than me was a drag, yeah? So I decided to just say I've got a part time job."

"You're really that much older, Tokunaga-san? Ah – sorry."

She'd started out speaking very informally, but then once she realized that Tokunaga-san was older she changed to be more respectful. Well, it's not like I didn't understand how she felt. Tokunaga-san really didn't look like she was 24 years old.

The younger boy looked upset, either because the dimly lit interior was scary or he was just tired, but at any rate Tokunaga-san said, "Well, see you tomorrow," and left.

No-one asked why Tokunaga-san had decided to reveal this to us.

When we left the cafe, the streets area around the train station were alive with people shopping. The florist above the "Mole Cafe 2" was quiet, but the displays in the glass windows were loaded with flowers.

"In the end, it was only Mizuno-san who left a consistent impression all the way through."

"Huh?"

I asked, curious at Kawatou-san's comment. I felt that I'd slipped up enough in Sei-mode that my original nature should have been revealed.

"You were an honors student in high school, right Mizuno-san? You're compassionate, a leader, attentive – like an older sister to everyone."

"Ah – "

I was dumbfounded.

The personality that I'd put so much effort into – the new Mizuno Youko, incorporating the irresponsibility of Satou Sei, the apathy of Satou Sei, the impetuosity of Satou Sei, plus the friendliness of Fukuzawa Yumi – had completely failed to permeate into the wider world.

"Uhh, and that's how you saw me, right from the start?"

I asked, to which both Kawatou-san and Himura-san responded with a resounding, "Yep."

"I see ... "

For no particular reason, I bought a single red rose on the way home.

Marguerite Ribbon 2

The magazine that Yoshino-san leafed through was the February edition of "Cosmos Friend."

Inside the Valentine's Day special was a 'Wrapping corner', and Yoshino-san had brought it thinking that it might be useful as a reference. Although it looked like the true owner of that magazine was Yoshino-san's onee-sama, Rei-sama.

"Hmmm."

The 'Wrapping corner' was a double-page spread, so didn't take long to finish reading. It contained things like how to make heart-shaped boxes, how to wrap things so it looked like there was a flower on top, and how to cope when there wasn't enough wrapping paper. There were plenty of good ideas, but nothing that made them exclaim, "This one, this one," after seeing it.

Basically, the 'something' that they all felt was lacking made them unable to reach a decision about the wrapping paper.

Yoshino-san's fingers deftly flipped through the pages of a serialized novel and the announcements of new Cosmos publications. The "Cakes for February and March" also flew past and she arrived at the Cotton Club's 'Try it Yourself' section. That page contained details on how to hand-make various items.

"Wouldn't the candy be more of an ornament to these?"

Shimako-san said. She was sitting beside Yoshino-san and had been watching on. That was pretty much what Yumi had been thinking, so she instinctively agreed, saying, "Yep." The items on that page all looked difficult enough to make to warrant that reaction.

"These would be a walk in the park for Rei-chan."

Yoshino-san groaned as she crossed her arms. It was probably a matter of how much skill they had, and how much time they could put into making these items.

But, that was fine. It was nice to have a cute wrapping for the candy, but wrapping was wrapping after all, and once the package had been opened its role was finished.

But if they gave them something handmade, and the recipient liked it, then she could keep using it long into the future – that's what Yumi was thinking.

"If we choose something simple, we should be able to do it."

Shimako-san said, pointing towards the first picture. Around it were a number of small items, all marked as "For beginners."

"But, even so. You and I need two, Shimako-san, and Yoshino-san needs three."

No matter how easy they were, the numbers made it difficult.

"That's true."

Even though her tone of voice made it sound like she was troubled by this, Yoshino-san appeared to be stifling a smile. She seemed quite pleased that she had received one more chocolate for Valentine's day than the other two.

"Well, Shimako-san has Noriko-chan, so people would have held back, right? And since Yumi-san is Sachiko-sama's petit soeur, they may have thought that you'd refuse the chocolate too."

Was that analysis supposed to be a show of humility or something?

"Well, when compared to the bulging bags full of gifts that Rei-chan received, three is so tiny, so cute."

Apparently three chocolates weren't enough to make her happy.

"Speaking of Rei-sama, what was she doing about return gifts this year?"

Yumi swung the conversation that way, looking for a point of reference. From memory, she baked cookies for everyone last year.

"Well, about that."

Yoshino-san closed the magazine and leaned in closer, as though to say, "Listen up."

"The gift givers took the admirable step of telling her, "We know you're going to be busy with graduation and so on, so there's no need for any return gifts." But, it's Rei-chan, you know? There's no way she could just say, "Thank-you," and leave it at that."

Indeed.

"So then what?"

"She didn't want to discard their thoughtful gesture, so she's not giving any return gifts on White Day, instead she's decided to wait until spring break to express her gratitude."

Yoshino-san then grumbled about the difficulty of obtaining the gift givers' addresses, since that wasn't written on the wrapping or cards. Indeed, nothing would make it through the post if it only includes the girls' names and classes.

"That's so like Rei-sama."

"She's decided to hand-make exquisite, elaborate cards. Really, she's such an idiot."

Okay.

Setting aside whether or not she was an idiot, that's just the kind of person Rei-sama was. This year, she hadn't been able to make Yoshino-san chocolates because she'd had one exam after the other on Valentine's day, so instead she gave her a handmade card.

"Have you used it yet? That, you know, umm, "Valentines chocolate request coupon"?"

Yumi inquired, and Yoshino-san answered, seemingly bored.

"Not yet. I've been thinking about what to get, though."

"And have you come to a decision?"

This time it was Shimako-san that asked. And the answer she got back was:

"Truffles."

"Huh?"

"Truffles, I said. Rei-chan's deluxe, handmade chocolates truffles."

"Chocolate truffles?"

By reflex, Yumi and Shimako-san looked at each other. Chocolate truffles were fairly low-key. Yoshino-san could request whatever she wanted, so was free to choose something bigger or flashier. There was no need for restraint. Rei-sama was more skillful than a professional, so no matter the request she'd probably be able to fulfill it.

"Two years ago, she gave them to Eriko-sama. I'd like to try them, to see how good they are."

"... Ah."

There it was, Yoshino-san's eternal rival, Eriko-sama.

Having graduated last spring with an outstanding academic record, Eriko-sama was Yoshino-san's onee-sama's onee-sama, making their relationship one of "grandmother" and "granddaughter."

Normally, this relationship was one of doting and indulgence, but in this case they both competed for Rei-sama, sandwiched between them. Musashi and Kojirou.

"Even now, you're competing with her."

"Sort of."

Yoshino-san spoke earnestly.

"I have a lot of different thoughts about Eriko-sama."

A Rival is Fine

"I'm Yamanobe Aki."

The young girl, having just been prompted by her father, introduces herself clearly.

"Of the violet class at ladybug kindergarten. Six years old."

My, what a well raised young lady. And the way she speaks shows her intelligence.

"I'm Torii Eriko. Student at an arts college. Currently, I'm a first-year."

I'm about to stop there, but she told me her age, and since we're both women it wouldn't be fair to keep this from her, so I add, "Nineteen years old."

"She's my friend."

The girl's father, Yamanobe-san, explains his relationship with me. Friend.

True, we're still friends.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Aki-chan."

We're neither more nor less than friends. We've known each other for six months now, but we've never kissed or even held hands.

Our courtship was prefaced by my marriage proposal to him, and his refusal and insistence that we should just be friends for now.

Although it's still a mystery to me as to whether or not I should be calling it a courtship.

Yamanobe-san has a daughter, and I'm busy at college, so it's unavoidable. As for dates, when we have a bit of time together midweek we go to the zoo and look at the elephants, or have tea at a cafe with an under-construction skyscraper visible through the windows. It makes me happy to see his face in profile, so I'm not particularly dissatisfied, but hearing my college classmates speaking fondly of their boyfriends or girlfriends makes me a bit uneasy about the discrepancies. Are we going to be like this for the rest of our lives?

Just as I was starting to feel that way, he jumped in with, "I'd like you to meet my daughter."

That was a step forward on the path from friends to lovers. No, with one leap I'd become a new candidate for mother. What would his daughter think of me? She'd probably be opposed to the idea.

So after a lot of worrying, sighs, outbursts of anger, and grumbling to my friends, the day has finally arrived.

It's a sunny Sunday afternoon in October, and the cafe by the train station has a decent number of customers.

"Let's get along together."

Hearing my words, Aki-chan looks down. Since I don't really know her, I can't tell if this is supposed to be a nod of agreement or if she's averting her eyes. As I puzzle over this, she continues happily eating her pudding.

"Is there anything you'd like to ask Eriko-san?"

Yamanobe-san asks his daughter. Like a husband stuck in the middle of a quarrel between his mother and his wife. He really is a clumsy individual, although that's not exactly news to me. I understand his desire to end this awkward silence, but how is his kindergarten aged daughter supposed to drive this conversation? It looks like it's up to me to provide something interesting to talk about – or so I'm thinking, but Aki-chan turns to me and asks a single question:

"Can we go home now?"

It feels like I've suddenly been punched. So that's how it is, you want to go home already. Meeting me has been a waste of time. These thoughts swirl around my head, and I'm unable to say anything in response.

"Aki, what are you saying?"

Yamanobe-san says, flustered.

"Dad, you said you wanted me to meet one of your friends, right? We've met, so that's done."

Bright kid. Her theory may be sound, except in the adult world certain phrases have a hidden meaning to them.

"That may be true for you, Aki, but I still have things to discuss with Eriko-san. And I couldn't let you go home on your own from here. So, you see."

A theory to rebut her theory. Yamanobe-san reveals his stalling tactic.

Fair enough. This is, in reality, an arranged marriage interview, and if it ends after a mere thirty minutes then I'll probably be apologetically declined.

"Couldn't she come too?"

Aki-chan glances at me.

"Huh?"

"If you want to talk to her, then couldn't she come back home with us?"

Yamanobe-san and I instinctively look at each other.

It's a mystery.

If Aki-chan was smiling, then it would be easy to understand. It was too hard to say goodbye to this wonderful older sister, so she wanted me to go home with her, that kind of thing. But, apart from her words, she isn't being very welcoming towards me.

"Aki-chan, you know, I'm delighted that you'd ask me to visit your home, but to barge in so suddenly – "

I'm not one of her friends from kindergarten, so I can't just rashly accept her offer. Adults have adult – , or so I'm thinking, until Yamanobe-san claps his hands together.

"Not at all, that would be great."

"Huh?"

"I'm not scrupulous about keeping the place clean, but if that doesn't bother you then please come along, Eriko-san."

"Hah."

To refuse the offer I'd have to say that I am bothered. About going to Yamanobe-san's house. Experiencing his everyday life. That doesn't bother me. It intensely interests me.

"Well then, just for a little bit."

I agree, catching up to Yamanobe-san as he walks to the register with the bill from our table. Aki-chan has already left the cafe.

Now, when visiting someone else's house it's imperative that you bring them a gift. While Yamanobe-san and his daughter are off buying train tickets, I purchase a box of cookies from a nearby confectionery store. There would probably be a larger selection in the food section at the bottom of the department store, but I'm in a hurry and can't do anything about that.

After arriving at the platform we don't have to wait long for an outbound train, which we board and then disembark from two stations later.

Aki-chan was quiet on the train – she didn't try to separate me from Yamanobe-san, instead sitting alone on a seat, looking at the floor.

"Are you sure it's okay for me to be imposing like this?"

I checked, just once, with Yamanobe-san, who was standing, holding on to the strap next to mine.

"Don't worry about it. Actually, I find it more interesting that Aki invited you."

I too am greatly intrigued by that.

Yamanobe-san's house is about a ten minute walk from the train station. I had expected it to be an apartment, or something similar, but it's an old, single-story bungalow.

"No running, Aki."

Just before we reach the house, Aki-chan breaks into a run. I'm conflicted by her apparent desire to get home, but am glad that I haven't been outright rejected just yet.

"Isn't it locked?"

"Aki has a key."

So that's it. The small figure turns the key with practiced ease, and the door creaks open.

"I'm home, mom."

I'm stunned when she turns into the house and shouts this out.

"I've told her to say that when she goes into the house, even if there's no-one there."

"Ah, right."

It's probably so no-one would think she was all alone in the house. Still, it caught me off guard.

"Oh, it's fine, don't make that face. She's hardly ever all alone anyway, her grandparents live about ten houses down."

So when Yamanobe-san has to leave for the day, they come around here or he takes her over to them. Apparently my distress at Aki-chan's use of the word "mom" hasn't registered on Yamanobe-san.

At any rate, it isn't appropriate for me to say, "I'm home, mom," so instead I say, "Pardon me for intruding," bow, and remove my shoes.

"Have a seat wherever you want."

I walk through to a six tatami-mat sized living room that's furnished and decorated in the traditional Japanese style. In the middle is a low tea table. Surrounding it are zabuton floor cushions. Tea cupboard, TV, ...

He'd said they weren't scrupulous about tidying, but everything is neatly organized. The teapot itself is sparkling clean. Was this Yamanobe-san's handiwork, or his mother's?

Yamanobe-san boils some water in the kitchen. Even though he told me to sit wherever I liked, it looks like they probably have favorite cushions to sit on, so I hold back and kneel directly on the tatami-mats.

Just as I'm wondering where Aki-chan has disappeared to, she reappears in the living room.

"I had to wash my hands. And to pee."

– Right. For no particular reason, I'm reminded of something. Hmm, maybe.

"Aki-chan, I bought these sweets as a gift, what would you like to do with them?"

What I'd meant was, "Do you want to eat them now?" but Aki bows, says, "Thank-you very much," and accepts the candy. Instinctively, I sit up straighter and say, "You're welcome."

Now that the first stage of the formal gift giving ceremony has been completed, Aki-chan stands up, still holding the candy. As I watch on, wondering what she's doing, she looks back over her shoulder and beckons me. Since I've been ordered to follow her, I do so. Then she slides open the sliding screen and moves into the next room.

" _ "

This room contains a butsudan, a household shrine. Aki-chan opens the doors of the shrine and places the candy in there as an offering. The bells tinkle as she closes her eyes and joins her hands together in prayer.

"Aki-chan, is it alright if I light an incense stick for your mother?"

I ask, after Aki-chan has moved away from the shrine. Then Aki-chan looks at me as though I was strange, and softly says:

"The candles can only be lit when there's an adult present."

"Then can you ask your father? If it's okay for Eriko-san to light the candles?"

Upon hearing this, Aki-chan nods and races off towards the kitchen. I consider myself an adult, but looking through Aki-chan's eyes, perhaps there's some confusion as to whether I'm an adult or a child.

"He said it was okay."

It isn't long before Aki-chan returns and says those words, whereupon I light one of the candles with a match. Then Aki-chan and I both light an incense stick and pray.

"You're strange, Eriko-san."

Aki-chan says as we stand up. Before I have a chance to ask, "Why so?" she provides the answer.

"All of my friends are scared of the shrine."

"Really?"

I don't let on as I extinguish the candle's flame, but I feel like I understand why she brought me over to the shrine.

After the three of us drink tea together and eat the cookies I brought, Aki-chan drags me over to her room.

"She must be overjoyed that we have a young woman in the house."

Yamanobe-san smiles optimistically as he watches us leave. Honestly, he doesn't understand a woman's heart at all.



"This is a photo from just after I was born."

Looking through the album, I watch my reaction. The photo is of Yamanobe-san and Aki-chan's mother encircling Aki-chan and smiling. A happy family photograph.

I don't stay completely calm, but I'm not hurt by it either. It shows that, in the past, Yamanobe-san has been happy. In contrast, it seems to be more painful for Aki-chan to talk about her mother in front of me. She's emphasizing that her mother is number one. And Aki-chan instinctively fears that I might take her mother's place.

That's why she invited me here, where she held the home ground advantage, before she started the fight. In the cafe she'd been as quiet as a mouse, but now she's chatting away merrily, like a completely different person.

"Even my name, Aki, my mother gave me that name."

Aki-chan opens a sketch book, draws the characters for her name in red crayon, and shows it to me.

"Really?"

"My father wanted to call me Jurassic."

"Jurassic, like the Jurassic era?"

Ever since I met the dinosaur loving Yamanobe-san, I've become acquainted with these terms.

"My mother was against that."

Yamanobe Jurassic. There was a possibility that the little girl in front of me could have been called that. It might have been cute, but his wife was opposed to it. So Aki had been suggested as an alternate name.

"Ah, I get it."

The light-bulb flicked on inside my head.

"Aki-chan's Aki comes from the characters for Hakuaki, the Cretaceous period, right?"

"Yep."

"That's a nice name – "

Hearing this honest praise, Aki-chan's stony facade crumples for just a moment. Her face is cute, but this momentary glimpse into her soul has grabbed at my heart.

"Say, Aki-chan. If you don't want to, you don't have to see me any more. But since I'm friends with your father, I'd like to meet with him to chat from time to time."

Even if Aki-chan opposes my friendship with Yamanobe-san, I wouldn't like to sneak around and see him behind her back. Therefore, I made an open declaration. I have no intention of backing away.

"You're friends with dad?"

Aki-chan asks, curious.

"That's right."

"So then you've never kissed him?"

"I haven't."

It's the honest truth, so I look straight at Aki-chan as I answer. I'm glad, from the bottom of my heart. Perhaps the reason we haven't kissed for the entire six months is just for this very moment.

"You haven't married?"

"I'd like to, but."

I openly confess.

"I'm not sure what your father thinks."

"I don't know."

"I guess not."

I wasn't expecting her to reveal Yamanobe-san's feelings. But Aki-chan is being honest. Since she's only six, she could have got away with saying that her father didn't like me, but she didn't. Maybe she wants to prolong this conversation, since I'm being so foolishly open with her.

"Do you think you and I could become friends, Aki-chan?"

"Friends?"

Aki-chan raises her eyebrows.

"Yeah, friends. I mean, I love your father, right? And I'm sure you love him too. So you see, we have something in common."

"But doesn't that make you my rival rather than my friend?"

"Rival?"

She must have been taught this by someone. That a friend of her father's might try to become her new mother. To watch out, because they might try to steal her father. And that that person is her rival.

"You know, rival is written in kanji like this."

I borrow Aki-chan's sketch book and write the kanji for rival, 好敵手, in black crayon. Then I point at the three kanji, one at a time, as I explain.

"This might be hard to understand, but the first character is the one for love (好き). As in, love and hate, that love. This one's opponent (敵). The last character is the one for hand (手), but it can also mean person. You know the word for team member (選手), right? That's a chosen (選ばれた) person. So a rival is a beloved opponent."

"A beloved opponent?"

Aki-chan looks at me in confusion.

"Right. If there's no love, then they can't be your rival. So if you think of me as your rival, Aki-chan, that makes me very happy."

Then, when I finish speaking:

"Okay."

Aki-chan mumbles.

"You can meet with dad. From time to time."

Maybe I'm just greedy to the core. But, pleased by this approval, I just have to ask for even more.

"And some of those times, maybe all three of us could meet?"

"Mmm."

Aki-chan's response isn't one of assent, but a noncommittal rebuff. Still, at the very least, she hasn't said, "No way." In any case, it's a restrained response.

"We could all go to the zoo or the amusement park together. I could go with you when you need to go the toilet."

Aki-chan looks at me in surprise.

"Am I wrong? I thought you didn't like going into unfamiliar restrooms all alone."

In truth, it's a leading question. I have a fair bit of confidence in that inference. Back when I was in kindergarten at Lillian's, I had a classmate who was like that. She was fine at places she was familiar with, like school or at home, but she worried about going alone in unfamiliar places and hated it. So much so that her mother would come along whenever we had a school excursion. Even when she visited her friends house, she'd go home rather than using their toilet – or so I'd heard.

"You're wrong."

Aki-chan denies this, her face turning bright red. I must have hurt her pride. Since she's such a level-headed kid, she probably doesn't want anyone to know that she doesn't like going alone into unfamiliar restrooms.

"I must have been mistaken then. Please forgive my rudeness."

Apologies first, then I look through the drawings that Aki-chan has made in the sketch book. Triceratops, Tyrannosaurus Rex, Stegosaurus, Archeopteryx – . Another adult version of a dinosaur whose name escapes me watching over a child dinosaur that has just hatched from an egg. I really get the impression that she's Yamanobe-san's child.

As I turn the page, Aki-chan tugs at my sleeve and says, "Hey."

"Would you really come with me?"

"Huh? Ahh – "

I quickly grasp what she's talking about, and nod.

"Of course. There's a truce during toilet time."

"What's a truce?"

I put my arm around the shoulder of my tiny, inquisitive rival.

"It's a bit like a time-out."

Marguerite Ribbon 3

"Ah, right. Eriko-sama was pressuring you to choose a petit soeur, wasn't she Yoshino-san?"

"Right. Even though she's graduated, she's still setting traps for me."

Autumn of last year, Eriko-sama had suddenly appeared at the school athletics festival and Yoshino-san had promised to introduce her petit soeur at the inter-school kendo tournament. Well, Yoshino-san had met the middle-schooler Arima Nana-chan as a result of that, so it couldn't really be called a complete nuisance.

"But Eriko-sama gave you those variety gifts, didn't she? The Maple Parlor – "

The 'best before' date on those had been one of the ways that Eriko-sama exerted pressure on Yoshino-san, but Shimako-san seemed to have filed that incident in her memory as an example of a benevolent senior indulging her junior with a gift of sweets.

"Variety gifts, huh."

Yumi dragged that memory out of its storage location. When they opened the tin, there was an assortment of chocolates, cookies and candies all gorgeously arranged in their own little compartments.

(... Hmm?)

The box had separate compartments so that the sweets didn't move all over the place. It reminded her of something.

Perhaps thinking the same thing, Shimako-san gently rose from her chair.

"First of all, shouldn't we fetch our sewing kits from the classroom?"

"Ah."

"Right."

Yumi clapped her hands.

It was like their sewing kits. The lower section didn't have any compartments and was used to store thread and scraps of cloth, but the

upper section, with its separate compartments for pincushions, scissors and pinking shears, tape measures and sewing machine needles, looked just like the variety gifts tin.

"With some decent cloth, we should be able to finish it today, don't you think?"

At Shimako-san's urging, Yumi and Yoshino-san followed her out of the Rose Mansion.

As they walked through the corridors, their conversation naturally turned to confectionery.

Tales of the delicious sweets that Rei-sama had made.

Of Shimako-san's older brother baking cookies at a kindergarten.

And the rumor of a fifty per day limit on the number of rice cakes that a traditional confectionery store near Yumi's house would sell.

"Speaking of sweets."

Shimako-san smiled as she reminisced.

"There was Roman manju and Florentine senbei."

"That's it – those phantom sweets."

Yoshino-san held her index finger aloft.

No, that couldn't be it, because those sweets didn't actually exist.

"I'm so sorry. I was taken in by my onee-sama's joke, and then got both of you involved too."

Yumi quickly bowed, but Shimako-san waved her hand back and forth, saying, "It's fine, it's fine."

"Apparently the original source for that was my onee-sama, anyway."

"It was fun, so don't worry about it."

Yoshino-san smiled too. Then she put the memories into words:

"Italy, huh."

The trio stopped in front of the classroom.

"That takes me back."

"It's almost been a whole six months since that trip."

The sky they saw outside the corridor window undoubtedly stretched all the way to Italy.

Buying Florentine Senbei

It was the beginning of September, just after summer holidays, and Katou-san was talking about going on vacation during the midterm break.

"A vacation? That sounds nice – "

I interrupted my friend's speech, as I continued to eat my jelly in the cafeteria.

"Then why don't you come with me?"

"I'll go, I'll go."

Anywhere, anytime.

"Satou-san. At least ask the destination before replying."

I'd been far too glib, and Katou-san temporarily suspended her topic of conversation to chastise me.

"Ah, right. So where are we going?"

I asked, but the destination didn't really matter to me. A short break, sounds nice. I hadn't really cut loose during the summer vacation, and I'd saved up a bit of money from my part-time job.

" ... To Italy."

Katou-san said softly.

"Italy!?"

"See, that got you interested."

"Ah, is that it? An overseas trip. And not just to Asia, but to Europe. That's great, Italy."

Apparently, Katou-san's parents (her father and new mother) had been there for a honeymoon over summer, and were so happy they'd given her some money to go too. Katou-san's father was still suffering complications from his collapse, and his rehabilitation was on-going, but he was well enough to travel.

According to Katou-san.

"I think they'd feel awkward if it was just the two of them that had fun."

Katou-san had delayed starting university by a year when her father collapsed, so this was probably meant as both an apology and a show of gratitude. So, to please her father, Katou-san had decided to spend the money.

"It's not a tour, so there'll be some costs. I can cover the hotel room, but we'll split things like transportation and meals, what do you say?"

Katou-san took out her calculator and started totting up about how much money I'd need for the trip, then showed me the result and said, "About this much." Ones, tens, hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands of yen ... Between my savings and the pay from my job, it looked like I'd have enough. I gave her the thumbs up.

"Oh, right, Satou-san, do you have a passport?"

"I do. I used it two years ago, for my school trip."

Katou-san was taken aback by my reply.

"Oh wow. Just what you'd expect from the students of Lillian's Girls Academy. Truly, they are classy ladies. Your school trip was overseas!? Where did you go?"

"Rome, Florence, Venice."

It goes without saying, these are all Italian cities.

"... It looks like I'll have to invite someone else."

I grabbed Katou-san's arm as she stood up to leave. After putting the spoon I was using to eat the jelly back in its cup, obviously.

"I said I'll go. I'll go, I'll go."

"But you just went there two years ago. It's even the same route I was planning on taking. For the same money, you could go to Egypt or Morocco with someone else."

"Ah, Egypt would be nice. I'd like to go to Morocco too."

"See."

"But this time around, I'm going to Italy with Kei-san."

Right, right. When I talked to her, sometimes I'd call her Katou-san, and sometimes I'd call her Kei-san. Similarly, sometimes she'd call me Satou-san and sometimes she'd call me Sei-san.

"Don't force yourself. Back in high school, I went to the toilet by myself during breaks."

"Ah, me too."

But what did that have to do with the vacation?

"I'm not looking for a dirty weekend."

So that was it. I concurred. But that didn't mean I was about to say so long, farewell.

"Well, let's see. Despite what I may have said, I'm not the type of person to accept an invitation unless I'm interested."

"So you're interested then?"

"Yep."

"Why?"

Katou-san had a curious look on her face as she once again sat down facing me.

"My memories, my recollections of that trip are all kind of hazy."

"What, did you get a fever on the trip or something?"

"Before I left the country, actually."

Back then, regardless of what I was doing, thoughts of Shiori filled my head. Shiori was a student at Lillian's Girls Academy, one year below me. I'm still not sure what to call my relationship with her – we were part kindred spirits, part best friends and part lovers.

In truth, I hadn't wanted to go on the school trip, but to get out of it I would have had to tell my parents and teachers the reason why. Reluctantly, I boarded the plane. So I wasn't lying when I said that I'd come down with a fever.

"Anyway, we're getting off track. That's why I want to redo that vacation."

"Hmmm."

The only memories I had from that school trip felt like I was watching some dull travel program. But I thought that it would be more enjoyable for the person I am now.

That's when I had a flash of inspiration.

"We'll have to search for Florentine senbei."

The first I learned that our vacation was scheduled for the same dates as the Lillian Girl's Academy school trip was on the day we left the country.

"Oooh, that's not good."

When I arrived at Narita Airport, the place was crawling with that familiar uniform. I'd think nothing of this if I was within the school grounds, but seeing so many of them squirming in a public place left me with a somewhat eery feeling. Well, I'd been a part of that a few years ago.

"It's the second years that go on the trip, so this would be Yumi-chan's grade."

Which meant that Shimako was among them.

I'd been hiding myself from the group of dark uniforms as best I could, but upon envisaging Shimako's face I zipped my coat fully closed and left the area.

Toudou Shimako was the girl who became my soeur during my time in high school at Lillian's Girls Academy.

What was up with that? If it had been Yumi-chan or Yoshino-chan, I'd have wandered over and casually called out, "Yo." But I couldn't do that to Shimako. Of course, it wasn't because I hated her, in fact it was quite the opposite.

I can't really explain it well, but I love the Shimako that's there when I'm not around. I don't want her former "onee-sama" to intrude on her current pleasant memories.

Nonetheless, it was now far too late to cancel my trip. But even if we were going on the same plane, our seats would probably be a fair distance apart. And if I could just make it through that, we probably wouldn't see

each other at all. Italy's big. Even if we did accidentally end up in the same city at the same time, there wasn't much to worry about.

There was something more important that I had to concentrate on just then.

"Katou Kei."

What to do? The place I'd arranged to meet Katou-san was right in the middle of where the Lillian's students were lining up for their school trip. If her bus hadn't arrived, then I could have waited near the bus stop and met her there, but I'd just caught a glimpse of her on the far side of those dark school uniforms. She probably thought I hadn't arrived yet as she was reading a book, and not noticing the feverish glances I was throwing her way. She'd look up if I started yelling and waving, but I was bound to be spotted by the nearby girls from Lillian's first.

I don't mean to boast, but I'm fairly well known at that school. If they realized I was here, there'd be an uproar. Or at least a minor fuss. That wouldn't really bother me, but it would be troublesome if Shimako noticed.

Unfortunately, Katou-san didn't have a cell phone.

With no other options, I decided to go to the information desk and ask them to call her over.

I only remembered the similarity of my name to Katou-san's full name after the announcement had been made. Despite the announcer's perfect pronunciation I found myself instinctively wanting to answer, "Here," when I heard "Katou Kei."

Before too long, Katou-san made her way over to the information desk. She didn't seem to have noticed, but she was obviously being followed by a number of little lambs with ivory sailor collars and black dresses. If I were spotted now, then all my hard work would be for naught.

I told the information desk attendant to have Katou Kei wait there when she arrived, and left. The excuse I gave was, "I've got to go to the toilet," but in truth I'd been in such a rush that there was an air of authenticity to it.

After being called over to the information counter, and then made to wait for ten minutes, Katou-san was really mad.

I didn't encounter all that many more Lillian's uniforms after arriving in Rome.

On the first day, it was evening by the time we arrived at our hotel. Our second day was spent touring the Vatican, but we (perhaps fortunately) got off to a late start because both myself and Katou-san overslept, probably due to the long flight. We were staying at a different hotel to the Lillian girls too, but, well, that was as expected.

I saw a small group of them wandering freely around Borghese park, but it was nighttime and fairly dark, so even if they saw my Asian figure they wouldn't have known that I was Japanese, let alone a recently graduated senior of theirs.

"I guess there's nowhere we can buy Roman manju."

Katou-san grimaced at my mumbling.

"Satou-san, you're weird."

Really? Thank-you.

After Rome came Florence.

Naturally, they didn't sell Florentine senbei at the train station, in the sweets shops, or at the bars. Roman manjuu and Florentine senbei were original designs that I had concocted in my imagination.

It started last year, when I said to Sachiko and Rei, "Bring back some Roman manju or Florentine senbei as a souvenir." Sachiko had looked at me with an icy glare, and Rei had brushed it off, saying, "If I see any, I'll buy them for you." If I see any. Not only did she know they didn't exist, she handled it like an adult.

If that had been Yumi-chan, I probably would have got a much more interesting reaction.

Ohh, they have that kind of thing, huh? I'll get some to take home too. Where do they sell it? It wouldn't be written in Japanese, so how would they spell it in Italian? – etcetera, etcetera.

Ahh, I can just picture it. It'd be good to reach out to Yumi-chan, just to confirm this. An assortment of Yumi-chan and Florentine senbei would go brilliantly together.

"Buon giorno signorina."

On the north bank of the river Arno, in an unnamed jumbled alley of shops, a voice called out to me. Well, "signorina" was Italian for "lady" so they could have been calling out to someone other than me. At any rate, a guy calling out, "Hey, lady," as I walked down the street probably thought he was flirting or something. But it had been said with such exquisite timing that it caused me to stop.

"Buon giorno signore, or is it signorina?"

I stood still, and called back in response.

"Signore, signore."

The guy who looked like he owned the store smiled at me in response. I was flirting with a large parrakeet, in a cage hanging outside the store. It may have been an actual parrot.

"Say gokigenyou for me. Gokigenyou."

My mischievous side came gushing out. The parrot tilted its head in confusion at hearing these words for the first time.

"Gokigenyou."

But after repeatedly saying this a number of times, soon enough the parrot responded with, "Gokigenyou."

"That's enough, Satou-san."

Katou-san tugged at my sleeve after patiently waiting for me to teach the parrot this one phrase.

"Wait, just a bit more."

"I want to get some soap from that chemist. Then after that, how about that marbled paper shop?"

"Welcome to Florence."

"Satou-san."

I was tenacious. It was fun, and I was completely absorbed in it.

"Florentine senbei, Florentine senbei."

The shopkeeper jolted back in surprise. At this Asian woman who was taking no notice of the bags on sale, instead engrossed in teaching new words to the parrot. Please don't think all Japanese women are like this. At the very least, Shimako probably wouldn't do this kind of thing.

"Florence is a nice place, come and have a look."

When the parrot had mastered these phrases, Katou-san called out to me from behind.

"Give it a rest, Satou-san."



Hanging from Katou-san's hand was a paper bag from the chemist that she'd said she wanted to go to. Inside were about ten bars of soap.

"You went there alone?"

"Yep. You were just wasting time."

It had taken Katou-san roughly thirty minutes to go to the chemist, choose the soap, pay, and then return.

I'd spent that thirty minutes amusing myself with the parrot.

"Give it a rest, Satou-san."

The parrot reproduced the phrase that Katou-san had said just once.

"Give it a rest, Satou-san."

Yes, I'll stop. With that, Katou-san and I headed back to the alleyway.

The parrot was still calling out.

"Florentine senbei, Florentine senbei."

It amused me that some Japanese tourist would hear that parrot and go searching for Florentine senbei.

Marguerite Ribbon 4

After returning to the Rose Mansion, they opened their sewing boxes.

"Ah, I knew I didn't have any large pieces of cloth."

Shimako-san said, after sorting through the cloth in the lower compartment of her sewing box.

Large pieces of cloth generally weren't scraps. To begin with, the amount of cloth used in class was probably carefully calculated so that there wouldn't be too much left over.

The pieces of cloth in their sewing boxes were sized so that they weren't a nuisance – neither too big nor too small. Instead, they were the perfect size for practicing with a sewing machine.

"I thought this lunchbox cover could be good. We could wrap the candies in it too."

Looking at the design in Cosmos Friend, it was a square piece of cloth similar to a handkerchief. There were only four corners to stitch, so it seemed like it should be easy. However, since she'd used the past tense, did that mean that Shimako-san had already dismissed that idea?

"We just don't have a large enough piece of cloth to make a square 30cm a side. We could sew several pieces of cloth together, but that would be a lot more work to make sure it all fit. On the other hand, if we made the square 15cms then it wouldn't cover a lunchbox."

Shimako-san said as she fiddled with two pieces of cloth, one light-blue with a small white floral print, and one plain and cocoa colored.

"Good point."

Yumi spread out her scraps of cloth too. She had a piece left over from the skirt she made that was gray with a white stripe, and another from the blouse that was baby pink.

"Hmmh."

Judging by her sigh, Yoshino-san seemed to be in much the same position, with her yellow polka-dot and olive green pieces of cloth arranged in front of her.

At any rate, they'd all arranged their pieces of cloth and thread on the table. It looked like everyone had chosen to make their skirts and blouses out of 100% cotton, probably because it was easy to work with.

They all had some embroidery thread left over also. Two different colors per person. They'd used it to do needlework on their blouses.

"Yumi-san has red and dark green, Shimako-san has white and moss green, and I have yellow and green."

Yoshino-san then followed it up with a mumbled:

"So we all chose embroidery thread in the color of our rose?"

She smiled as she pointed it out, even though she was included in the embarrassment.

"Because."

Yumi desperately tried to rationalize it.

"We were only allowed to use two colors, and the obvious thing to embroider was a flower, and you can make a rose with only one color, and there was a reference pattern."

Shimako-san tapped Yumi on the shoulder.

"Don't worry about it. I heard Touko-chan made a tight skirt with a large rose print pattern."

"Oh, really?"

A tight skirt with a large rose print pattern.

From memory, they'd made the skirts some time near the beginning of first-year, which meant that Touko had chosen that bold pattern way before she became Yumi's petit soeur. And there's silly little Fukuzawa Yumi being embarrassed by her choice of embroidery thread – as she thought this, the conversation continued on around her.

"We'd probably have just enough to make a book jacket."

"Does candy really go with a book jacket? It'd seem kind of strange, don't you think?"

"I think you're right."

Shimako-san and Yoshino-san discussed amongst themselves.

Belatedly, Yumi joined in with:

"So then a bookmark would seem out of place too."

"Yeah. Even though they're so easy to make."

Neither a book jacket nor a bookmark were as good as a lunchbox cover. It seemed to be a problem of compatibility with the candy. However, the book cover and bookmark were extremely compatible with each other.

"Okay, so we want something that can be used as both a wrapping and something else."

Yumi said, in a flash of inspiration. The lunchbox cover could have been used to wrap the candy. In contrast, the candy would fall out of a book cover, and a bookmark wouldn't work as a wrapping at all.

"Well, how about this?"

Shimako-san opened the issue of Cosmos Friend to the hand-made corner and pointed at a pouch.

"But the width is 20cm, and we don't have enough cloth for that."

They had enough material for the length, but there pieces were only 17cm wide at most.

"Then what if we did this."

Shimako-san sketched out a blueprint with modified length and breadth sizes on the back of a scrap piece of paper. It was easy to visualize because she'd used a ruler to make it life-size.

"With this, the candy should just fit inside, right?"

After fetching one of the candy boxes and lining them up, Yumi was amazed. It fit perfectly, like it was made for that purpose. Once again, Shimako-san was brilliant.

Shimako-san cut around the edges of the blueprint, making a pattern.

"With this, we'll have about a one centimeter margin for the seam on each side – on the open side we can fold the seam down, run a cord through it and then use our embroidery thread to fix the seam into place.

"What should we use for the cord?"

"Don't we have some ribbons?"

"Oh – !"

That was a good idea, so they high-fived each other.

Yumi enjoyed her time with her onee-sama and petit soeur, but this kind of energetic interchange with like-minded people her own age was fun too.

"Hey."

Yoshino-san said softly, smiling.

"Remember the last time it was just the three of us, like this?"

The Problem of Adding "-San"

It was either the end of summer or during autumn, I'm not sure which, but it was just myself, Shimako-san and Yoshino-san in the Rose Mansion.

I'm not exactly sure how the conversation turned to that topic either.

I think the opening was probably that one of our classmates had asked why the second-year Rose family trio addressed each other using the honorific '-san.'

"Come to think of it, Sachiko-sama and Rei-sama have a more intimate style, not using honorifics when addressing each other."

Shimako-san said softly.

"The recently graduated former Roses were the same."

Yoshino-san added, remembering.

When I was first plunged into the Yamayurikai, the former Roses (ie. Sachiko-sama, Rei-sama and Shimako-san's onee-samas) called each other "Rosa Chinensis," "Rosa Foetida," and "Rosa Gigantea." However, after the elections for the next student council, they stopped using their titles and instead called each other by just their given names, "Youko," "Eriko," and "Sei." They had probably reverted to what they'd used before they became Roses.

"Even Noriko-chan calls Touko-chan, 'Touko.'"

Shimako-san smiled when I said this.

"Ah, but in return she gets called, 'Noriko-san.'"

We'd reached a break in our work, so we spent some time relaxing and drinking tea, and so on. It was neither hot nor cold, and the afternoon passed pleasantly.

"I wonder when she started that. I get the feeling she initially called her 'Touko-san.'"

Yoshino-san looked up, as she fiddled with her braids.

"I suppose it was probably because of what happened during the first-years welcoming ceremony."

"Ahh."

Hearing Shimako-san's words, Yoshino-san and I found ourselves agreeing with her.

"Because of that "Touko – !" right?"

Noriko-chan's angry roar had reverberated around the chapel. It was already a thing of legend.

"Quite the opening."

Enlightened, we all sipped our tea.

"Ah, so was there some opening that led you to start calling Noriko-chan just by name, Shimako-san?"

When I asked Shimako-san this, she smiled at me in confusion, her facial expressions conveying the message, "What are you saying, Yumi-san?"

"She's my petit soeur, so of course I'd call her just by name."

"But didn't you call her that even before you became soeurs? Like, "Noriko ♡", "Shimako-san ♡. ""

Honestly, what are you saying, Shimako-san? But then she responded with:

"Maybe I did. I'm sorry, I don't really remember."

– And that was it. If it was said unintentionally, then it would be embarrassing for the person hearing it.

"If there were some opening, do you think we'd call each other just by first names?"

Yoshino-san asked softly.

"Who knows?"

That silenced her for a short while. But then she sighed as she said:

"Should we try it?"

"Huh?"

Shimako-san and I both instinctively recoiled.

"It'll be okay. Just to see what it sounds like. Come on Yumi-san, you start."

Yoshino-san was motioning from me to Shimako-san with her hand, so, with some trepidation, I said:

"Shi, Shimako."

"Yes. Umm, Yoshino."

Passing the baton, Shimako-san called to Yoshino-san.

"Yes. Yumi."

"Ooowah."

It slipped out before I could respond. But it wasn't just me, the other two were visited by the same emotions.

"I can't. I'm too self-conscious – "

The trial had resulted in thumping of the table, stamping of feet, and a sense of embarrassment so acute I wanted to run away.

"Based on that, I don't think we should try and force ourselves to change."

Shimako-san observed while laughing so hard she had tears streaming down her face.

"My onee-sama had to force me to call her, "onee-sama.""

Back then, I'd been quite self-conscious too.

"Ahh, that's right."

My two friends laughed, after all, what could they do if a petit soeur couldn't even call her own onee-sama, "onee-sama." Heh, heh, heh. I'm sure neither of them were self-conscious about saying that at the start.

"It's no use if an onee-sama and petit soeur are self-conscious around each other. Yumi-san, what are you going to do when you find a petit soeur?"

"A petit soeur ... "

I still couldn't imagine that ever happening.

"If you always use "-chan" when you address her, you'll be reprimanded by Sachiko-sama. Like she did to Noriko-chan, remember?"

"Ahh, I remember that."

Shimako-san smiled as she remembered that occasion.

Well, back then Shimako-san and Noriko-chan weren't yet soeurs, and Sachiko-sama merely questioned why Noriko-chan was using '-san' instead of showing more respect when addressing an elder, so strictly speaking it wasn't the same situation.

"Don't worry, when I find a petit soeur I'll make sure to call her by her name only."

I raised my fist into the air. Wait for me, petit soeur. That kind of gesture.

"You seem to be enjoying yourself, Yumi-san."

"You too, Yoshino-san."

Shimako-san sighed, exasperated, and Yoshino-san stuck her tongue out at her.

"Darn, I guess I brought that upon myself."

Indeed. Unlike the dignified Shimako-san, a Rose with a petit soeur, Yoshino-san and I had to do our best to find a petit soeur before we started thinking about how we would address her.

"Well, it's not like the use of honorifics has any bearing on how close our relationship is."

We sipped our tea, looking at each other.

That's how it was.

For the moment, all three of us were in agreement that adding "-san" was fine.

Marguerite Ribbon 5

"That's right. If I remember correctly, in the room on the first floor there's ... "

Shimako-san left the room as she spoke, so Yumi and Yoshino-san followed after her, thinking, "What's going on?"

The room on the first floor of the Rose Mansion was normally used as a storeroom. When required, they'd tidy it up and make use of it for some other purpose, but there hadn't been any need for that recently.

It was into that room that Shimako-san slowly walked. Occasionally she'd bend down, and occasionally she'd stand on tiptoes, as she slid boxes that were blocking her field of vision out of the way.

"What are you looking for?"

Lacking patience, Yoshino-san asked the question instead of waiting for Shimako-san.

"The sewing machine."

"Sewing machine!?"

"And the iron too."

"Iron!?"

Yumi joined in the questioning.

"Do we really have those in the Rose Mansion?"

"I haven't used them, but I was looking for something in here a while ago and, out of the corner of my eye, I saw something that could have been them, or could have been something else."

That was an exceedingly vague recollection. Still, Shimako-san believed they were somewhere in the room.

"We don't have to use them, but if we do it will definitely make things easier, and the end result will probably be neater too."

Quite right. And so, Yumi and Yoshino-san joined in the search.

"It's an electric sewing machine, right?"

"That's right. The case is about this big."

Shimako-san used both hands to indicate the size. About the same size as the sewing machines in the Home Economics classroom, perhaps a bit larger. Given the size, Yumi thought it should be fairly easy to find.

"Whereabouts did you see it?"

She asked, looking for a clue.

"I can't remember, but I think it will be relatively close to the ground."

"Why's that?"

"It's a sewing machine, so it'll be quite heavy, right? And usually you don't put heavy things on top."

Just like Shimako-san had predicted, the sewing machine was found close to the ground. It was underneath an old desk, and behind a cardboard box, so it had been quite difficult to locate.

The words, "Rosa Chinensis – Donation," were written on the sewing machine's case. When they opened the case, they saw a fairly old sewing machine, so it looked like it had either been bought new by a Rosa Chinensis many, many years ago, or it was an old sewing machine that had been brought in from home. Since "Rosa Chinensis" was the only name written there, it wasn't possible to tell when it had been brought in.

The iron was beside the sewing machine. It didn't have anything written on it, but somebody had probably brought it in from home. Or perhaps it originally had "OO – Donation" written on it, but the letters had been completely erased by the passage of time.

"They should still be good to use."

At any rate, they decided to take both the sewing machine and iron to the second floor.

After plugging the iron into an outlet and waiting a while, it heated up. Similarly, when they pressed the start button of the sewing machine (without putting in a needle or thread) it made a healthy up/down motion over and over, so it looked like both were usable.

"I didn't see an ironing board, but I think we should be fine to use the table."

With that decided, they commenced work. It was decided that Shimako-san would make one first as a test, to see how it turned out.

The first step was ironing all the scraps of cloth, to straighten out the wrinkles, and then cutting them according to the pattern. Following that, a double mountain fold was applied to the sections that would form the mouth of the case, then this was ironed to form the sleeve for the cord.

Perhaps because it was hindering her work, Shimako-san took a hair tie out of her pocket and used it to gather all her hair together behind her head.

"Shimako-san, may I braid your hair?"

Yumi inquired. She found herself wanting to touch that fluffy, flowing brown hair.

"Leave it alone while I'm using the sewing machine, okay?"

Which meant that it was currently okay, since she was using the iron. Although that was probably a reluctant acceptance, since it involved finding a loophole in the refusal. Yoshino-san joined in mid-way through too, since someone else's hair is, after all, fascinating. It reminded Yumi of the simple joy of playing with dolls.

Starting at the hairband, Yumi's fingers weaved Shimako-san's hair into a braid. Since Shimako-san's hair was so wavy, it was actually longer than it looked. Since it was starting to get too long, Yumi took the end of the braided hair and used a ribbon to tie it next to the start of the braiding. In other words, the shape beneath the ribbon was a loop of braided hair.

"I've seen that hairstyle somewhere before."

Yoshino-san said, watching on from a short distance away.

"Now that you mention it."

Yumi nodded too.

"I don't remember where exactly, and it wasn't a photo but a black and white drawing."

It was Shimako-san herself who provided the answer.

"I think it might be in our Japanese textbook."

Shimako-san had neither looked in a mirror, nor had eyes in the back of her head, yet she was apparently still able to recognize the style her hair had been put into. During all this, she hadn't been distracted from her work either, as she cut the cocoa colored cloth to match the pattern, ironed the folds, stuck pins into the corners, and reached the point where she was ready to start sewing.

"Textbook?"

Shimako-san reached into her bag, took out her Japanese textbook, opened it and handed it to the puzzled pair. Then she smiled and said, "This one, right?"

"Ah – that's it."

Seeing the actual article, they quickly agreed.

"Hey –, the name of this hairstyle is Marguerite."

There was an illustration of it on the 'hairstyles' page, among pictures of hair parted in the middle, hair tied in the back and other Japanese hairstyles. According to the text, it was a Western hairstyle that had apparently been popular with young women around the year 1890 or so.

"Even today, it looks good."

At the very least, it really suited Shimako-san, since she looked like a Western doll with her light brown hair.

"Say, Shimako-san, do you take after your mother?"

Yumi idly asked as Shimako-san was threading the sewing machine.

"Huh?"

"I mean, since you don't really take after your father."

And, according to what Noriko-chan had told them a while ago, she didn't really take after her older brother either. Since her older brother and her father were so much alike.

"Ah, right."

Shimako-san smiled.

While on that topic, they knew a lot about Shimako-san's school-life, but not much about her home-life. Until the beginning of second-year, she'd

kept the fact that she lived at a Buddhist temple a secret. But with that out in the open, it felt like they'd missed a chance to ask her about it.

"And what drew you to Christianity in the first place? Was there some event that provided the spark?"

Unlike Yumi and Yoshino-san who'd been brought up in the Catholic faith since kindergarten, Shimako-san had entered into Lillian's Academy during middle school. And given her family environment, it's unlikely Christianity would have been recommended to her.

"Well, that's because,"

Shimako-san answered.

"When I was young, I was playing in one of the storage closets in our house, and right at the back there was a trunk. Inside the trunk was a rosary. I'm certain that's when the door to Christianity was opened."

"Why would there be a rosary in a shrine?"

It was an innocent question.

From the Buddhist perspective, Christianity was just a form of paganism. So why would a temple contain a tool that those pagans used to pray.

"It was one of my deceased older brother's possessions, so I suppose they couldn't bear to dispose of it."

"Your older brother's deceased? But, umm, that's odd. Noriko-chan said she met him. Plus, a while back, you told us about him baking a cake at a kindergarten – "

As she spoke, Yumi became increasingly confused. The time-line was all mixed up.

Shimako-san straightened out the time-line quite simply.

"The brother that Noriko-chan met, the one who baked a cake at a kindergarten, who is just like my father is Masafumi. In addition to him, there was another brother, called Norimichi."

And he's the deceased person. So that's how it was, huh.

"Shimako-san, your parents had three children?"

Wait, there weren't necessarily only three. For a long time, Yumi had thought that Shimako-san was an only child, only to one day suddenly find out that she had an older brother. Now it had been revealed that she had another older brother. If this pattern continued, it was possible they might gradually learn that she had five older siblings and five younger siblings, totaling eleven children in the family.

"Yeah."

Shimako-san agreed, while continuing to thread the sewing machine. But then, almost immediately, she seemed to reconsider and corrected herself by saying, "No."

Just as Yumi was bracing herself to learn about even more siblings:

"My father – "

That was an unexpected way to start the sentence.

"Yeah?"

Yumi and Yoshino-san both asked simultaneously. Shimako-san straightened her posture, then continued.

"Norimichi is my real father."

"Huh!?"

What the heck was going on?

My Siblings

I had a brother, one cycle of the Chinese Zodiac older than me.

His name, Norimichi.

Smart and serious – so serious he could be a bit high-strung – but he was always a kind brother to me.

Our parents were proud that he was their son. They seemed worried that his body wasn't that strong, but it's not as though they wished for him to be an Olympic athlete, for to do so would be to incur divine punishment. I think they would have been happy just for him to inherit the temple, which has been in our family for generations.

So, when my older brother was 12 years old and I, the second son, was conceived by chance and born, my mother and father were simply happy that I was healthy, and didn't have any great expectations of me in terms of studying, or following the path of Buddha. A nice thing about that was that I spent my childhood running free across the hills and fields. Whenever he saw my cuts and scrapes, or the insects or plants that I'd brought home as souvenirs, he'd smile at me.

"Masafumi, you're such a free spirit."

When he ruffled my hair, his hands were already the size of an adult's.

My wonderful brother decided, when he was still in school, that he would enter the priesthood and become a Buddhist priest. After graduating from university and while assisting our father, the chief priest, in his duties, he zealously pursued the trainings required to become a chief priest. For my brother, born and raised in the temple, learning the doctrine and the customs would not have been too hard. But the ten day ascetic retreats at places cut off from the outside world were about the limit of what his body could endure. They were far more severe than the trainings he had undertaken when he first joined the priesthood.

When I was in fifth grade, my brother spent a few days away from home. I seem to remember there was some religious training event nearby,

or he was participating in some group activity, and then he was planning on visiting the temples of his school friends. Originally, he was supposed to return after three days, but by the time he arrived home ten days had elapsed. Since my brother was so serious, naturally he'd informed my parents that his return would be delayed. But it seems he didn't say a word about why it was delayed.

On the afternoon of the tenth day, my brother returned. I was at school when he arrived home, so I'm not sure exactly what happened. But, according to the people that help out around the temple, he had been earnestly apologetic.

That evening, my brother didn't sit down with us for dinner. I felt uneasy about this, but my brother usually ate very little, and when he wasn't feeling well his appetite disappeared completely. I thought perhaps exhaustion from the trip had caught up with him.

When I returned from my bath, my brother was waiting for me in front of my room.

"Have you got a minute?"

I hadn't seen him in a while, and his face looked gaunt. His face was gaunt, but his expression was gentle. I'm not sure if the comparison is appropriate or not, but his expression was that of an angelic maiden. I suppose you could call it ephemeral.

I nodded, and opened the door to my room. He sat down on the cushion I offered him, and slowly surveyed my room. Then he straightened his back, turned to me and with a serene look on his face he informed me:

"Masafumi. I must apologize to you."

This was a sudden apology. Of course, I had no idea why he was apologizing. My brother was always honorable. I couldn't think of a single time that he had been unreasonable.

"I've decided to leave home."

"Huh?"

I couldn't believe my ears. The only way I could make sense of what he said was if he was leaving to enter the Buddhist priesthood.

"And by leaving home, I mean I'll be leaving the temple."

My brother slowly and calmly explained.

"You're in fifth grade now Masafumi, so you should understand what it will mean when I leave the temple."

"That you won't inherit the temple. Is that what you mean?"

"Indeed."

My brother nodded, then continued with, "And then."

"With me not inheriting the temple, people will probably expect that you will. And so, I apologize for all the trouble that will cause you. With me disappearing from the picture, it will also fall to you alone to honor and care for our parents. I think I should apologize for that too."

Slowly, I began to realize that he really was planning to leave home.

"Are you going away forever, is that what you're saying?"

Leaving home. Leaving the temple. Not just that, it seemed like he was going to disappear from the world entirely. That's probably what his 'leaving home' was.

"Don't make that face. I'm not suicidal, or anything like that. I'm leaving so that I can live a new life."

"I don't understand. Can't you live your new life without saying farewell to dad and mom and me? Leave home, say you won't inherit the temple, but can't you still come back home from time to time?"

I desperately wanted my brother to stay. But if that wish wasn't to be granted, at least let him remain connected to us in some form. But my brother wouldn't agree.

"For someone who expected to inherit the temple, and then threw it all away. I don't think I'll be able to come back here any more."

"Do you hate this temple?"

"It's not a matter of hating it or not. It's just that there's a reason why I have to cast it aside. Something that means I can't become a priest."

"And what's that?"

My brother smiled, then shook his head. I don't know if it was because he thought I was too immature to be told, or if it wasn't something he wanted to talk about just then.

"What did dad have to say?"

"Well, he was opposed to it. But, that's fine. It would have been worse if he was for it, because it meant he wanted to disinherit me."

When I heard that, it made my blood boil.

"You're just being selfish."

"I know. I'm selfish. Selfish, but I still came to apologize to you. I didn't expect you to understand."

I didn't respond. I couldn't express what I was feeling in words. I remained like that until my brother left the room, my hands balled into fists and my lips closed tight.

After that, it seemed my brother talked late into the night with our father in his room. By the time I awoke the next day, my brother was no longer around.

My father said to me:

"Forget that you ever had a brother."

I thought it was also selfish of him to say that to me. What about the ten years that I had spent with my brother? There's no way I could ever forget about him.

My brother's room was cleared. His belongings were put into a trunk and cardboard boxes, and then shut away in a closet. But, by no means were they thrown away. My mother and father still believed that he would see the error of his ways and return home.

Just like my brother had predicted, when the parishioners learned that my brother had left home they started looking at me as though I were the natural successor. My father didn't say anything, but I had no doubt who he secretly hoped would inherit the temple. He was probably waiting for the day my brother returned home, but he couldn't cling to such an aimless future.

About six months later, I don't know how he came across this, but an acquaintance of my father brought us news that my brother was married and had a job. It seemed his bride was a Christian. It looked like that was a part of why my brother had to leave our house.

My brother had chosen her and cast aside his family. Consequently, he probably wouldn't be coming home. It seemed this person had also learned where my brother was living, but my parents didn't presume to ask for his address or telephone number. I think they gave up on him.

And yet, my brother did return. When I was in my first year of middle school.

He wasn't alone, he brought with him a baby, about a year old. My brother's daughter.

"I never thought I'd cross the threshold of this house ever again."

My brother bowed deeply before our parents. No, it wasn't something as simple as that. He pressed his head against the tatami mat and didn't raise it for a very long time. He said that he was paying the price for his shame. After that, he broached the topic of why he hadn't been able to return home before then.

"Can this child, ... can Shimako be brought up here?"

"What about her mother?"

My father asked, his face hard.

"She died, less than a month after giving birth."

He said something about postpartum recovery, but it didn't hold any meaning to me at the time.

"Why can't you raise her?"

My father asked, again.

"If I could raise her, I'd want to do that."

He gently brushed Shimako's arms as she dozed, leaning against his leg.

"Is there a reason you can't?"

"My body's wracked with disease."

Then, from my mother, seated beside my father, came a sound that was part exhalation and part sob.

The three of them, well, four if you count Shimako, were sitting together a short distance away from where I was allowed to sit, and as the conversation continued, my head pounded.

What do you mean, your body's wracked with disease? If you go to hospital, can you be cured? Can you be saved with surgery?

But, after seeing my brother return home, discovering that he had a daughter, and that his daughter's mother had died, I couldn't control the bewildering thoughts swirling around my head.

At that point, my father was composed.

"Alright. But on one condition."

It may have been a feigned composure, but it was still magnificent.

"Anything, just tell me what it is."

He was obviously resolved to do whatever it took for his daughter. That he had returned home after vowing never to do so was proof enough of that.

"That you go straight to hospital, and follow whatever treatment the doctor lays out. So that you can dedicate yourself to the treatment, we'll look after your child. But, we're only looking after her for you. When you're better, we'll return her. Understood? You'll have to work hard, for her sake, to beat the illness."

I wonder if my brother could have objected. The still sleeping Shimako was handed over to my mother, and my brother was booked into hospital that very day.

I couldn't visit my brother for about a week, while they ran tests and performed scans on him. My mother took Shimako to visit him every day, but after a while he said they didn't have to come any more. Since it was staffed primarily by nurses, there was no-one to chaperone her. Plus, he said that he'd rather Shimako played at the temple.

The results of the tests proved that my brother's body was in an unexpectedly poor condition. I didn't ask them directly, but could tell by the expression on my parent's face after they met with his attending physician.

I considered that it might not be long until I lost my brother. That was incredibly disheartening to me. When my brother left two years ago, naturally I'd been upset, but I never thought that he might die – which provided a small amount of comfort. As long as he was alive, circumstances could change. But if he died, what then.

I looked at Shimako's face as she was sleeping, oblivious, in the living room and the tears flowed.

To have lost her mother just after being born, and then to be losing her father. All while she was still small enough to use one of the cushions as a bed for an afternoon nap. All while her hands, balled together as she slept, were so tiny.

On Saturday afternoon, I went to visit my brother in hospital on the way home from school. I was a bit scared of seeing him, but my mother said that I should visit him some time.

My brother had a bed by the window in a four-person hospital room. When I arrived, he was sleeping with the curtain still open. I didn't see anyone in death's thrall. It felt like god and man were in close attendance.

"Masafumi."

Before long, my brother awoke and smiled when he saw my face. When he looked at me, it was as though he said, "What should we play today, now that you're here?"

"I've been wanting to see you. You should stop by more often."

"... Yeah."

My brother sat up in bed, so I sat down on the chair beside him. It was the first time we'd sat down together and talked since the day he left. There must have been plenty of things I wanted to ask him, and plenty of things I wanted to tell him, but I didn't know where to begin. So I told him about my classes from that day, and the plants that I'd seen on the walk to the hospital.

He smiled as he listened to my stories.

"Masafumi, you're a scholar of the outdoors. Someday soon, I hope you'll teach this to Shimako."

It was said sorrowfully, implying, "Because I won't be around to." Then, as though in a daze, I quickly changed topics.

"Did you leave home so that you could marry Shimako's mother?"

"That's right."

This time around, he said what he couldn't say two years ago. So I continued to question him. I thought, at this point, he'd answer whatever I asked.

"Was she really a Christian? Did you become a Christian too? Was that why you didn't want to live at the temple?"

"That's not it."

My brother flatly corrected me.

"So we could be together, we both agreed to set aside the religion we believed in."

"But in this day and age, there's plenty of married couples with different faiths."

I said. Because I thought that if you really loved someone, then it was silly to let religion stand in your way.

"That's true. But in our case, it was something bigger than that."

My brother smirked. Then he looked out the window, and quietly said:

"Shimako's mother was a member of a convent."

"She was a nun?"

"She was on the road to becoming one. We met on the journey, became captivated by each other, and fell in love."

So he'd cast aside his faith to follow that love. They'd both looked deep into their hearts, and chosen love. Consequently, they both chose to discard their faith. That determination was typical of my overly serious older brother.

"What was her name?"

"Sasahara Yuria. When we got married, she changed her name, becoming Toudou Yuria."

"That's a foreign sounding name."

Finding out that some woman I'd never met shared the same surname as me made me feel somehow ticklish, and I blurted out those words in an attempt to hide my embarrassment.

"She was Japanese. I saw her birth certificate, so there's no doubt about it."

My brother opened the drawer beside the bed, took out a photograph and showed it to me. She was a beautiful woman with pale complexion and light brown hair. She fitted the image I had of Shimako's mother.

"And she died, right? Where was she buried?"

"Her older sister took care of the arrangements. Their mother is interred in a church near their family home in Kyushu, so they decided to bury her there too."

"You were okay with that?"

They were the remains of someone he held dear, so I thought he would have wanted to keep them close to himself. But if she were buried in some far-off place, like a church near the family home in Kyushu, then he'd hardly ever get to visit.

"I was. At first, I thought about buying a plot in a non-religious cemetery, so that we could be buried together, but I came across this when I was sorting through her belongings."

From the still open drawer, my brother took out a small article wrapped in cloth. Inside was something that looked like a necklace.

"What is ... ?"

"It's a rosary. It's something Christians use to pray. When we got married, we got rid of all of our religious artifacts. But, secretly, Yuria still held on to this. Right up to the very end, she couldn't renounce her religion. I regret that she couldn't call for a priest in her final moments, but it was too

late. I'd realized that there was no reason she had to keep our promise right up to her death. So I decided to return her to Jesus."

So Shimako's mother had held onto this rosary the entire time? Had she taken it out, from time to time, and looked at it? Or had she simply kept it, never taking it out of its wrapping?

"There's no reason to condemn her for this. I too kept a single juzu. It was one I'd inherited from our grandmother. And, sure enough, as I'm reaching the end of my life, I've returned to our temple. And although he doesn't have to perform my funeral, our father will probably read from the Buddhist scriptures at it."

I listened to my brother, unable to say anything. Incapable even of politely nodding.

"When Yuria died, I blamed myself. If we hadn't met, she would have been a nun by then. She would have been spending her days in the service of her God. Whether it was God or Buddha, I don't know, but why were we joined together? Was it all just a prank? Had she really been happy marrying me? Right at the end, she smiled as she embarked on that final journey, but surely she must have been sighing inside to leave behind the child that she had only just given birth to."

After he said that, all the strength drained from my brother's body.

"But, I kind of understand now. If we hadn't met, then Shimako wouldn't exist in this world. So it's okay."

My brother did what he had to for Shimako to remain. Being in the same position as Shimako's mother, perhaps he understood her true feelings.

Probably exhausted from talking, my brother returned the rosary and photograph to the drawer, then lay down on his side.

"Masafumi."

Hearing my name called, I looked up.

"I was allowed to live my life the way I wanted. So you should live your life the way you want too."

" ... Brother?"

"When I die, it's likely that the temple, our parents, and everything else, will fall on your shoulders. You should do what you want, whether that be to accept it or to reject it."

My brother closed his eyes.

"That was all I wanted to tell you."

"Are you saying that it's okay for me not to inherit the temple? Because there's Shimako?"

I knew that talking further would be a burden on him, but I had to ask. The true meaning of his words. If I missed this chance, I may not have received a second opportunity.

"I think Shimako should do whatever she wants too. If I got the chance, I'd tell her that too."

"But if we both do what we want, what will happen to the Shouguu temple?"

"Our father's still healthy. Don't worry about what happens after that. The temple's been in our family for generations, but we don't have to obsess over it. We can always accept a chief priest into the family."

My brother had changed. His usual stubbornness was gone.

There was no longer just one straight path. There were plenty of forks in the road, and it was fine to retrace your steps if you'd gone the wrong way. Perhaps this was what he learned during his two years of struggle.

My brother passed away about six months after that.

Smiling as he began that journey.

I thought he had probably gone to meet Yuria-san.

I had faith that the Christian heaven and the Buddhist paradise were one and the same. That it was a place without distinction between religion.

Instead of losing an older brother, I gained a younger sister.

A sister, one cycle of the Chinese zodiac younger than me.

Since my brother had told me to do whatever I wanted, I have decided to become a monk. Soon enough I will begin that training, and in time I plan to qualify as a chief priest.

When Shimako grows up, when she's old enough to have hopes for the future, I want her to be able to make that choice freely.

If she chooses the path that her older brother walks down, to become a chief priest, to marry a priest, then I will turn the temple over to her, and all will be well.

But if Shimako, like my brother, chooses a different path, then I will take responsibility for the temple.

That's my "what I want to do."

That's my free choice.

Marguerite Ribbon 6

"I guess I asked something I shouldn't have ... "

Hearing Shimako-san's explanation about her family life, Yumi and Yoshino-san felt only a sense of shame.

When Yumi learned about Touko's parents it had been a considerable shock, but that had been tempered by the steady build-up – the recognition that something was bothering her, and the way Touko opened her heart to Yumi. But this time it had all been very sudden and Shimako-san had spoken in the same tone of voice she'd use to say, "Tomorrow's weather will be fine," so Yumi didn't know what to say. Her mind was reeling.

Although, come to think of it, it wasn't that sudden at all. Shimako-san had said, "My household is complicated." Yumi had just assumed she meant because she was the Catholic daughter of a Buddhist temple priest.

But was what she said really true?

Obviously, Shimako-san wasn't the sort of person to lie, but she'd been smiling as she recounted her life story, and was still smiling now that she'd finished.

"On the contrary, I'm the one who should apologize. I feel like I'm making you fuss over me. Even Noriko became gloomy when I told her."

Shimako-san smiled, saying the people around her treated it as a bigger deal than she did. – It looked like she was telling the truth, after all.

"Now then, if we don't get a move on, we won't finish these today."

Shimako-san said, as though to blow away the serious atmosphere. The one who was fussing over people was Shimako-san.

But even though her friends' faces had turned gloomy, even though the atmosphere had turned serious, Shimako-san probably didn't regret that she had opened up to them. Because Yumi herself was glad that she had heard this, and she thought that Shimako-san probably felt something similar.

Then Shimako-san slowly, but accurately, worked the sewing machine, finishing her first bag. Pink ribbons matched the cocoa colored sleeve. Two

ribbons looped around the bag, one protruding on the left-hand side and one on the right, so they could be tied together to close the bag.

"Ahh – . It's wonderful."

The handmade case had been completed. The trio applauded.

"Put the candy in and see how it looks, the candy."

Excitedly, Yoshino-san brought over one of the small bags of candy. After putting it in the bag and tying it closed, the bag took on more of a three-dimensional quality, which made it seem even better. With the ribbon tied into a bow in the front, it really felt like a present.

"I tried to conceal the seam by sewing it once on the outside, then turning it inside out and sewing from the inside, but I think a zigzag stitch might be better."

"Sounds good."

Yumi had been intently watching Shimako-san as she used the machine, but she hadn't understood the theory behind sewing once from the outside, then turning it inside-out and sewing it again. Instead, she decided to be grateful for the sewing machine's 'zigzag' setting.

"Scissors, paper,"

As Yoshino-san cried out, "Rock," she thrust her fist out. Overwhelmed by her intensity, Yumi held out her index finger and middle finger. Rock versus scissors. Yoshino-san was victorious.

"Sorry, Yumi-san."

With that, Yoshino-san won the right to use the iron and sewing machine after Shimako-san.

Shimako-san had already started making her second one, using the light blue cloth with a floral pattern. In response to Yumi's request, this time she demonstrated how to use the zigzag stitch.

"I see. This way you can deal with the seam at the beginning."

"It's easier than waiting until it's in the shape of a bag, right?"

Shimako-san's movements and explanation were unhurried, so it was easy to learn from her.

"Ahh, Yoshino-san. You can't just cut around the pattern. You have to leave some room for a seam, otherwise this part will be smaller."

It must have been tough on Shimako-san, watching over her two less-skilled friends as she continued to work on her own item. Particularly in the case of Yoshino-san, who seemed to react to Rei-sama's fondness for handicrafts and sewing by being inept at them. It was kind of sad that she had to make one more than the rest of them.

At any rate, Yumi had finished cutting her cloth into the pattern, but was blocked by the person ahead of her (Yoshino-san), so she took a piece of paper from the same stack of misprints that Shimako-san had used to draw the blueprint and started doodling. Since she'd lost at scissors-paper-rock, she couldn't jump ahead of Yoshino-san to use the iron. Even so, if Yoshino-san were in a normal condition then Yumi would ask if it was okay to go ahead of her, but it looked like she was getting wound up, so that would probably just result in a fight.

For no particular reason, she drew a picture of a pouch in the upper half of the page. Following that, she added an explanation in the blank lower area. This was, yeah, an illustrated diary.

Today, I met with Shimako-san and Yoshino-san in the Rose Mansion, and we made presents for White Day.

As she started to write, Yumi suddenly found herself enjoying it. As a result, she became enthusiastic and found herself wanting to write more.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Yumi-san."

Yoshino-san called out, her expression calmer than before. Then she came over to peek at Yumi's handiwork and said, "What's this?"

"Oh, today's diary entry? Even though we're still in the process of making them, you make it sound like we've finished everything and gone home already."

"If it's written in the diary, then that's how it must be."

Yumi stood up, holding on to the plain pink and gray-and-white-striped pieces of cloth that she'd already cut into shape.

"Ah, but before that."

She added one more thing to the end of the diary entry.

On the way home, I posted an air-mail letter to Kanina Shizuka-sama using the mailbox at the north entrance of the train station.

"Yumi-san, isn't that more of a reminder?"

It was just as Shimako-san had pointed out.

Writing it out was a way of preventing herself from forgetting to post the letter.

Yumi-chan's Illustrated Diary –

Future Volume 1

March ○ (Monday)

Today, I met with Shimako-san and Yoshino-san in the Rose Mansion, and we made presents for White Day.

We spent a bit of time thinking about what to make, but once we started work things went smoothly and we left to go home surprisingly early. Everyone was really pleased with what we'd done.

On the way home, I posted an air-mail letter to Kanina Shizuka-sama using the mailbox at the north entrance of the train station. I wonder how long it will take to get to Italy.



After separating from Shimako-san at the M-station ticket gate, I took about three steps before I called out, "Ah, no."

My voice was unexpectedly loud, and I quickly looked around in a bit of a panic. It was the time of day when people were commuting home from school or work, so there were a lot of pedestrians around but, luckily, my voice didn't appear to have stood out amongst the chattering, sounds of footsteps, and other noises surrounding me.

Careful, careful. Just a little bit further and I'd turn into a "crazy person who talks to themselves even when no-one else is around."

Oops, if I get sidetracked with that I'll forget what I was supposed to be doing again.

The letter to Shizuka-sama that I was supposed to put in the postbox near the north entrance was still in my possession. I hadn't mailed it yet, even though I'd written it in the diary.

I turned around to go back, but then thought better of it and decided to head towards the south entrance. Either the north or south would do. Thinking about it, the diary didn't form any kind of binding contract. After all, I'd written, "things went smoothly" and "we left to go home surprisingly early" and it's hard to tell if that's what actually happened. Well, since I was directly involved in that completely subjective measure, and that's what I wrote because that's what I thought, then that's how it must have been.

Still, it was mildly amusing to write something in a diary, and then to have the outcome comply with your prediction. The reason nothing outlandish happened, like meeting an alien, or picking up a briefcase with one hundred million yen inside, was because it wasn't written about in the diary. So it was fun to think that the diary was as close to reality as possible. But the bits where it differed were also interesting.

And that's how I found myself standing in front of the red postbox at the south entrance. Just before posting it, I made one last check.

Stamp, check. Recipient's address, check. Air-mail mark, check. The seal was glued shut. Everything was in order.

Having completed the checklist, I held the letter to the silver mouth of the postbox. In my mind I wished it a safe voyage, then gave it a gentle nudge.

The topic of the letter was my petit soeur. When I met Shizuka-sama during our school trip, I promised that I'd give her a full report once I'd acknowledged a petit soeur. She'd been kept waiting for quite some time, but at long last I was finally able to post such a letter.

When I turned around, pleased with a job well done, I found a young woman dressed in black standing before me.

"I thought that was you, Yumi-san."

I knew that face.

I was stumped on who it was for just a moment, but then the circuit in my memory snapped in to place and I called out, in a much louder voice than before.

"Ooowaaaaah!"

This time, my voice was loud enough to draw the attention of everyone in the vicinity. Because, to me, the person standing there was as outlandish as an alien.

"Wh - What is it, Yumi-san?"

Even the person I was pointing at had been lured into raising their voice.

"But, but."

I looked back and forth from that person to the mailbox, over and over.

"I'm allowed to be in Japan, aren't I? After all, it's my home country."

The person who laughed as she said that was Kanina Shizuka-sama, in the flesh. Who I'd just sent a letter to.

"Don't tell me you read my letter and came flying back?"

Such a coincidence, but an unbelievable conclusion. So, for starters, I tapped Shizuka-sama lightly on the arm. Yep, her arm provided the proper tactile feedback. It didn't appear as though she were an apparition.

"Letter? To me? Sorry, I haven't read it. It probably hadn't arrived by the time I left."

" ... I suppose not."

I'd only just dropped it in the postbox. For it to have already arrived would have been magic. Plus, it would mean that Shizuka-sama knew how to teleport herself. That would be the only way to get from Italy to Japan instantaneously.

"There's been some misfortune in my family, so I've temporarily returned to Japan."

"Ah, my – "

condolences, was what I was about to say, but Shizuka-sama waved it away, saying, "It's fine, it's fine."

"My great-grandmother on my father's side was 101 years old. It was a peaceful death."

That probably explained why Shizuka-sama was dressed in black. They were her mourning clothes.

"Do you want to go somewhere? Well, that's what I'd like to ask, but this is the train station near school, and the cafe's kinda ordinary. Plus, you're in your school uniform."

"Sorry."

"Well then, how about I get you a can of coffee?"

Shizuka-sama pointed at a convenience store. I agreed, and followed her over.

"Here you go, Yumi-san."

As she held out the warm cafe au lait, Shizuka-sama asked, "And what do good little girls say at times like this?" I bowed my head, said, "Thank-you very much," and accepted the offered drink. This time around, I managed to avoid Shizuka-sama saying I was being improper.

We leaned against the station building's external wall and slowly sipped our cafe au laits, while calmly watching the buses and taxis proceed through the roundabout in front of us.

"The school I go to is usually strict about being absent or late, but my teacher is a bit of a Japanophile. "If it's an important funeral, then go home," they said, and gave me a week's vacation. In return, they asked me to bring back a lucky coin. Apparently they'd heard about some custom of handing out 5 yen coins as a longevity charm."

Two years ago, Shizuka-sama had been a student at Lillian's Girls Academy, but she moved to Italy to study singing. When I met her at the leaning tower of Pisa, she said she was studying for exams, but it looked like she was in school now.

"The funeral was today, and I plan on going home tomorrow, so I hadn't contacted anyone. But despite that, I just happened to run into you, Yumi-san. At first, I couldn't believe it."

Shizuka-sama said that all her relatives had gathered at her great-grandmother's house, which was in the neighborhood, and that her parents

were still there. She'd left, alone, so that she could return to her parent's house and do some more preparation for tomorrow. But then she'd unexpectedly caught sight of me.

"Ah –, Shimako-san was here until just recently."

I realized, finally pinning down something that had been nagging away at me for a while. Unlike Yoshino-san, who had gone her separate way at the school gate, Shimako-san had been with me up until the train station, so if things had gone perfectly then they could have met.

"It's okay, I've sent her a letter."

"Oh."

That's right, Shizuka-sama and Shimako-san were penfriends.

"Oh, right, what about your letter? Why on earth were you writing to me?"

"Umm – "

I couldn't answer that, I'd sooner reach into the mailbox and pull out the letter I'd just sent.

"Well, it's – "

I was stopped mid-sentence.

"It's okay. I can tell you don't want to talk about it. And if you answer, it'll spoil the fun of getting home and reading your letter."

"I suppose so."

Although, it's far more likely that Shizuka-sama would arrive home before the letter.

"Then I won't ask you the other questions I'd prepared either. Since it would be bad if they were related to the letter's contents."

"I see."

Those questions were probably regarding a petit soeur. Therefore, obviously, that's what must have been written about in the letter. You're sharp, Shizuka-sama.

"It's almost time for the high-school graduation ceremony, isn't it?"

"Yeah."

I agreed with her statement.

"If I hadn't gone to Italy, then I'd be part of that ceremony with Sachiko-san, Rei-san, and everyone else, so my feelings on it are complicated. But since I'm only one person, no matter how much I desire it, I can only walk one path."

Her feelings may be complicated, but she didn't seem to be in two minds about it. She'd freed herself from that a long time ago. Since about a year ago, when she'd announced her candidacy in the student council elections.

My thoughts about my onee-sama's graduation were complicated too.

In my head, I knew that we couldn't stay in the same place forever, and that this was the start of my onee-sama's new journey, so I should be happy.

But, what, I wonder. When the day of the ceremony comes, how will I be? Maybe I'll break down in tears in front of everyone, just like my onee-sama one year earlier.

Feeling someone's eyes on me, I looked up and saw Shizuka-sama staring at me.

"It's okay to cry, but make sure you smile when you see off – "

Her lips moved to say 'Sachiko-san,' but her voice was drowned out by a car's horn.

"So that she can have peace of mind as she starts her new journey."

"Yes."

I couldn't ask how she knew this. Although given how expressive my face is, it was probably plainly obvious what I was thinking.

After draining her bottled cafe au lait, Shizuka-sama solemnly murmured.

"In a way, today was my great-grandmother's graduation ceremony."

After that, she cheerfully waved goodbye, then made her way up the stairs to the train station.

I smiled until she'd disappeared from sight.

Just in case she happened to suddenly turn around.

Marguerite Ribbon 7

After ironing her pieces of cloth, Yoshino-san cried out, "Ooooh – there's more."

It seems she had found a different future journal entry in the pile of misprinted papers.

Even though she should have been threading her cotton through the sewing machine, Yoshino-san seemed to have succumbed to temptation. Oh dear, Shimako-san's supposed to be explaining how to do this, but Yoshino-san's making her wait. Yumi, the creator of the distraction, felt somewhat responsible and had her eyes downcast.

"What's this, "Holding hands?" Ooooh."

Hey, there's no need to read it out loud.

An irritated Shimako-san silently does Yoshino-san's job, threading the sewing machine. It seems she'd finally had enough.

"Yumi-san, when does this take place?"

"It's planned for this Saturday."

"Oh? Must be nice, going on a date with your petit soeur."

"A date?"

Shimako-san looked up. That keyword seemed to have piqued her curiosity.

Yumi flicked the iron's power switch to 'off', and shook her head.

The word 'date' had bounced back and forth, but was the event awaiting her this Saturday really a date?

"It's not really a date, we're just going to visit a shrine, to give thanks."

Yumi-chan's Illustrated Diary –

Future Volume 2

March Δ (Saturday)

Today, I went to a shrine to the god Inari with my petit soeur, Touko.

The other day, while I was chatting with her, the conversation turned to New Years shrine visits. When I told her I had visited a local Inari shrine with my brother Yuuki, and had wished for my then-strained relationship with Touko to be reconciled, she insisted that we should visit the shrine to give thanks.

I'd heard from my brother that if your wish is granted then you're supposed to take an offering of deep-fried tofu when you give thanks, but since I'd also wished for my loved ones to stay healthy all year, I thought it should be okay for me to go towards the end of the year, or maybe even the beginning of next year.

Even though I said the visit would have been in vain if my mother then became sick, we agreed to go on Saturday. So after school, on the way home, we headed towards the shrine.

Yuuki drew a map to the shrine for me, so we found our way there quite easily. I wasn't all that familiar with the neighborhood from the New Years shrine visit, so it felt like I was visiting for the first time.

Touko and I stood side-by-side as we visited the shrine, then returned home holding hands.



After school on Saturday, when Touko appeared in front of my classroom, she was carrying a box. It was about the size of a residential first-aid kit. But it wasn't made of wood, the casing looked to be nylon or some similar material.

"What's this?"

I asked, and Touko answered.

"A cooler box. To avoid misfortune, and to keep the smell from escaping."

"What's inside?"

Then Touko looked at me with a "You still don't know?" look on her face.

"You mentioned an offering of deep-fried tofu, right?"

As Touko spoke, she opened the lid and showed it to me. It did indeed contain deep-fried tofu. There were three or four of the plastic packs that you might buy at a supermarket. Surrounding those were ice packs, to keep it cool.

"... You're well prepared."

"Well, it saves us time compared to buying it on the way there. And I wasn't really sure if there were any stores near your house, onee-sama."

My, what a capable petit soeur. – If someone gets a compliment like that, they probably wouldn't take it the wrong way. I wanted to see her giggle and graciously accept, saying "It's all thanks to you," but it didn't look like that was going to happen.

"Hold on a minute."

Leaving her with that, I hurried to the school office on the first floor.

"Umm, onee-sama."

Thanks to my overly thoughtful petit soeur, my work had unexpectedly increased. I flew to the sole payphone that students were allowed to use and dialed my home phone number.

"Ah, mom? Have you bought the deep-fried tofu?"

Like Touko had said, up until yesterday we'd agreed that we'd stop at a supermarket on the way there and buy some deep-fried tofu. But then my mother had said that she was going shopping in the afternoon, so I asked her to buy some. That was this morning. Of course, I did it to save time.

"Ahh, I guess so. No, that's not it. Touko brought some. Yeah, yeah. Thanks."

Since mom answered the phone, it meant she was home. Since she was home, then she had obviously finished shopping. And it goes without saying, a wonderful mother like mine wouldn't have forgotten to buy my deep-fried tofu. Thankfully, she said to take Touko's to the shrine and that we'd eat ours at home.

When I hung up the phone and turned around, Touko was standing there like a ghost.

"Uwah."

"... You were prepared too, onee-sama."

She almost sounded bitter when she said, "With the tofu." It looks like she'd caught on to what had happened.

"It's okay, don't worry about it. My family loves deep-fried tofu."

I hastily sought to smooth things over, but had nothing to follow through with. A family that loves deep-fried tofu, what's up with that? It would have been better to say that we loved it with sushi or curry.

"Anyway, let's go. Otherwise our efforts to save time will have been for nothing."

I cheerfully headed towards the shoe-box area. Touko said, "Mmm," and followed after me, looking morose.

The mix-up with the deep-fried tofu wasn't Touko's mistake, it was because we were both trying too hard to be considerate. We got along too well, could be another way to put it. But, as a generally competent girl, she looked so delicate when she wasn't capable of doing something well. Her depressed look was adorable (and not in a pitiful way).

Touko quickly perked up again. By not fussing over her while she was pouting, she must have thought I was taking her needs into consideration. Courageous (I think that fits).

"Speaking of recipes with deep-fried tofu, it's used in inari-zushi, where it's wrapped around sushi, right?"

While on the bus, Touko raised this topic of conversation.

"And there's kinchaku – you make a pouch of deep-fried tofu and fill it with things like mochi rice cakes, and have it as part of an oden stew."

As someone who claimed to be from a family that loves deep-fried tofu, it was only right that I should know a lot of dishes that use it.

"And when minced it goes well with miso soup, or a rice dish, and you can make a nice broth out of it."

"Ah, at our house we bake it in the oven until it's crispy, then grate it and use it as a condiment."

"A condiment?"

Touko was really getting into this. Which reminded me that when she came to my house, and she ate some of my mom's homemade cooking, she was asking questions about the ingredients, how it was prepared, all those sorts of things. Maybe she often cooked at her home.

"Like Japanese ginger, or white spring onions, or crumbled nori seaweed. You have it when it's piping hot, with soy-sauce or noodle broth or the like."

So I explained it enthusiastically.

"That sounds good."

"My dad really likes it. He says it's great as a snack with alcohol."

"My father rarely drinks in the evening. But it sounds like it would go well as a side dish with dinner."

That's great. Touko had been able to receive something useful to her.

Now, while all this was going on, the bus arrived at M station and we transferred buses, got off at my stop and headed towards the Fukuzawa residence. At first we'd been planning to go straight to the shrine, but then we decided to stop in at home and drop off our school bags, since my house is closer to the bus stop than the shrine.

"I'm back."

Instead of my mom, it was my younger brother Yuuki who came out to greet us in the entrance.

"Welcome back. Oh, Touko-chan, please come inside."

Although, strictly speaking, it wasn't that he came out to greet us, but that he'd just arrived home himself.

He must have caught the bus before ours, which we'd just missed.

"Gokigenyou. Pardon my intrusion."

My real-life younger brother and my school-life younger sister exchanged greetings. It was a somewhat strange feeling.

"Yumi, here."

Yuuki waved a piece of paper torn out of a notebook. When I looked at it up close, I saw that it was the map showing the roads to take to the Inari shrine that he'd drawn.

"I go to all the effort of drawing it for you, and you forget to get it from the entrance."

He said, self importantly.

"No way, I left it there because I know how to get to the shrine."

That was a lie. I'd inadvertently forgotten to pick it up on the way out. And I hadn't even realized that I'd forgotten until just now.

"Then I'll look after this piece of paper. Onee-sama, please guide us to the shrine using just your memory."

As she spoke, Touko took the paper from Yuuki. Oooh, that girl is so cheeky. So it'd be a complete loss of face for me as an onee-sama if I didn't valiantly struggle forward alone.

"Something smells good."

Just as Yuuki's nose was twitching, mom appeared in the entry.

"Welcome home. I was just making lunch, sorry for keeping you waiting."

That's my mom for you. She'd obviously been wondering what to use the deep-fried tofu for, and the first thing that must have popped into her head was inari-zushi.

Honestly, I was really hungry, but it would have been inexcusable for us to eat deep-fried tofu before we made an offering of it at the Inari shrine, so

we decided to go there first. When we informed mom of this, she wrapped up six pieces of sushi for us to take along.

Jumping forward to the ending, I wasn't able to guide Touko to the Inari shrine. Annoyingly, I had to let the map wielding Touko lead me there. There are a lot of narrow alleys in that neighborhood, and if you're off by one street then you end up in a completely different area. As though you've been tricked by a fox. Because it's in such a hard-to-find spot, I'd only recently become aware of its existence, even though it's in my neighborhood.

"Oh –, here, here."

I remembered the red torii archway, standing alone in the middle of a residential area. Along with its accompanying trees, it felt a little out of place. The impression I got was different to my previous visit here – probably because back then the red torii and the trees blended into the background more because of the darkness.

"Come on, Touko."

I took hold of Touko's arm, as though finding this place had all been my own achievement, and we walked through the torii.

"What should we do with this?"

Touko asked, indicating the plastic wrapping around the deep-fried tofu that she took out of her cooler box.

"The plastic, ah, good question."

Should we take it out of the plastic wrapping, or was it fine the way it was? I was completely clueless about the proper etiquette.

"I guess foxes could tear the wrapping."

"Our neighbor's dog can tear candy wrapping open. So can crows."

"Alley cats can get into plastic bags too, that's why you have to cover the garbage bags with netting on bin day."

"Speaking of garbage, this neighborhood is strict on separating out the trash, isn't it?"

"I suppose. Although from a different point-of-view, it's like putting food scraps in a plastic bag."

"How about we leave it on top of a tissue. Since paper comes from trees originally."

"But aren't they tough to decompose, which is why you can't flush them down the toilet?"

"... I guess so."

We then spent another five minutes humming and hawing over what we should do. The plan we eventually decided on was to use a fallen leaf as a plate. There were a number of pretty leaves of the right size scattered around the shrine, so we took one of them, unwrapped the deep-fried tofu and placed it as an offering. Yep, that somehow seemed right. Much better than the plastic wrapping with "Deep-fried Tofu" written on it in large letters.

After wiping our hands clean on a handkerchief, we clapped and prayed at the shrine.

'Thanks to you, I was able to reconcile with Touko,' I earnestly reported.

After that, we ate the inari-zushi under the shade of the trees. Touko praised mom's cooking, saying it was very good. Best of all, it suited her tastes.

"I wonder what we should do about the deep-fried tofu. If we leave it as is, it'll go bad."

I vocalized the thought I'd just had.

"If we leave it like that, it'll be gone soon."

Touko said.

"Why?"

"Because the god's familiars will eat it."

"Huh?"

"It's like when you scatter beans for the setsubun festival, they're gone before you know it, right? That kind of thing."

I see, perhaps that's how it is. Just as I was about to agree with her, Touko smiled.

"On the way here, we passed a number of cats, right? And there's crows about too."

And sparrows, and ants, they were all familiars.

At any rate, I thought I'd come back in a week's time and check on the deep-fried tofu. If it was still there, then I'd take it home and put it with the other household scraps to be thrown out on garbage day. Despite Touko's assertion that it definitely wouldn't be around.

As we were walking back to my house, Touko said:

"I heard this from a classmate, but from time to time they have raccoons around here."

"Huh? A raccoon might eat the fox's favorite food!?"

Because they were sticky from the inari-zushi juices, we walked home without holding hands.

Marguerite Ribbon 8

Although things may not have gone as smoothly as the diary described, all the bags were eventually completed.

At any rate, the power of the iron and sewing machine had been incredible. At a stretch, the bags looked like something you might buy. No, that was going a bit too far.

As they looked at the bags placed atop the table, the trio let out a sigh.

"There's still something not quite right."

"You think so too?"

Indeed. Even though they were well made, there was something missing.

"How about we embroider a small design on them?"

"That's it."

The three girls took their embroidery threads out from the lower section of their sewing boxes.

"Ah – . If we're going to embroider, we should have done that first."

No point saying it now, when it's too late to do anything about it. After all, it was only when the bags had been completed that they established that something was missing. They were left with no choice but to take extra care when doing the embroidery not to sew the front and the back of the bag together.

"Red, white, yellow and three types of green."

Sitting before the bags and six types of embroidery thread, the trio folded their arms.

"So, what can we do with these?"

"Roses are predictable. And embarrassing."

"Right. I don't think we should embroider something with too much meaning."

Something meaningless would be better.

They weren't presents from the future Red, White and Yellow Roses, but personal gifts from Fukuzawa Yumi, Toudou Shimako and Shimazu Yoshino. They chose to turn a blind eye to how this contradicted with the discussions that had led to them deciding to make the bags.

"We've got a lot of green, so we could use the different shades for something like clover."

"Or a turtle."

"Or a crocodile."

The moment she said this, Shimako-san and Yoshino-san's silently mouthed the word 'crocodile.'

"We don't really have to focus on the green too much. There's red, white and yellow too."

Shimako-san pointed out.

"What about tulips?"

Yoshino-san, red, white and yellow tulips would be a bit too simple. But instead of saying that, Yumi said:

"Or a multicolored umbrella with red, yellow, white and green."

At which point, Shimako-san and Yoshino-san looked shocked as they pointed out:

"... Don't all of Yumi-san's recent ideas sound like corporate logos you've seen somewhere before?"

The criticism came because they were willing to overlook the first time, but not the second.

"Oh, really?"

Those designs probably came to mind quite clearly. The crocodile and umbrella were both famous brand logos.

"That's not what I meant."

Yumi shook both her hands.

"Even though it was so blatant."

Yoshino-san wasn't about to go easy on her. Shimako-san then kindly followed that up with:

"Since we don't all have to do the same embroidery, if Yumi-san wants to do an umbrella, then that's fine. Just as long as you don't have red, white, yellow and green lined up alongside each other. For instance, you could restrict it to just one color."

Red umbrella, yellow umbrella, white umbrella, green umbrella.

"I'll pass."

Even in her imagination, none of those struck home.

"If I was going to do an umbrella, I'd want it to be blue."

But, unfortunately, they didn't have any blue embroidery thread.

"Ah."

Remembering, Shimako-san said, "Yumi-san's blue umbrella."

"What's that?"

Yoshino-san tilted her head in confusion.

"You know. It went missing at a convenience store, then for some reason it was returned by Aota-sensei – "

"Ah, there's a story there too, huh."

That story took place during last year's rainy season.

Yumi's umbrella, which had taken a solo voyage before returning to her, was still in active use.

If umbrellas could talk, she'd secretly like to hear the tale of what happened during its ten day trip.

Memories of the Blue Umbrella

I wonder if the rain's stopped.

I idly pondered this as I handed the receipt to the customer.

"Thank-you."

As she gave a cursory nod and walked out, the neatly folded green and orange umbrella that the office lady held was still wet with moisture. As an input to my deliberation, it could go one of two ways. Was it folded because the rain had stopped, or was it folded because she'd entered the store?

The customers in the store were a girl wearing a local high-school uniform and a middle-aged man. Neither of them were holding an umbrella. Had they not brought an umbrella because it wasn't raining when they'd left home this morning, or had they gone out this evening because it had stopped raining? At any rate, it's the nature of a train station that you can travel a long distance without needing an umbrella, so I probably wouldn't learn much just by watching the customer's hands.

Well, I didn't really care whether it was raining or not just at that moment. What mattered to me was whether or not it would be raining in an hour's time.

"I'm sorry, the raisin-chocolate is sold out for today."

It was just after 7pm. My part time job at the bakery finished at 8. Incidentally, the raisin-chocolate had been a hit product for our store just recently – it sold out within 30 minutes of being put on sale at 3pm. Knowing that booms will always come to an end, the shop manager had a policy of not increasing the number of items of a well selling line. I think that's correct.

I was worried about the rain because I hadn't brought an umbrella with me.

It was Saturday, so my shift had started at 4pm. After attending lectures at university in the morning, I'd returned home, and it wasn't raining when I left again at 3:45 so I'd made the mistake of forgetting my umbrella. Since it

was the rainy season, I was usually in the habit of taking a folding umbrella everywhere with me, but I'd put it in my handbag along with my textbooks. That was my downfall. When I left to go to my part-time job, naturally, I left my textbooks behind.

I realized I'd left my umbrella behind when it started spitting, but by that time I was already in sight of the station. If I'd turned around to go home, I'd have been late for work. So I dashed towards the train station.

Just as I arrived, a bus swept past me into the turn-around area. About half of the twenty passengers got off the bus and opened already wet umbrellas. It had been raining earlier, somewhere along this bus's route.

When I saw the last guy getting off the bus, I was a bit shocked.

I couldn't narrow the shock down to one specific thing – I think it was probably just a general shock.

I knew that guy, just a little bit. Since we both used the same train station, I'd seen him around from time to time. He never came into the store to buy bread, but I'd seen him walk past the front of the shop. I think we were about the same age. Importantly, he had the kind of face I liked. In other words, he was handsome. That was all I knew about him, so there was much more I didn't know.

The guy that got off the bus was carrying a blue umbrella. With a floral pattern. A lady's umbrella. Based on the design and color, it was probably a young girl's.

While I'd been a little disturbed by seeing this man with a lady's umbrella, the next moment I received an even bigger shock. After getting off the bus and reaching a covered area, he threw that umbrella away. Well, maybe he was just placing it there. He didn't actually throw it, he leaned it up against the wall, but then continued out through the ticket gate, leaving the umbrella where it was. To my eyes, he'd thrown it away. He'd thrown away the umbrella that didn't suit him at the train station.

That was, in general, a shock.

Leaving behind the gentle rain, I entered the bakery. But as a result of that, I couldn't help but notice the umbrellas the customers had when they came in. Particularly when they were bluish umbrellas.

I wonder if the rain's stopped.

I wonder if that umbrella's still in the same spot.

If the rain hasn't stopped when my shift finishes. And, if that umbrella is still in the place where it was abandoned – .

When I got to that point, I realized that I was thinking foolish thoughts.

Really, I wanted it to be raining. Because I wanted to pick up that umbrella and take it home.

"Put out the 'everything half-price' signs."

My manager's voice came from further back in the store. Looking at the clock, it was 7:30. Only 30 minutes until closing. I was serving customers at the time, so the other part-timer, a school-aged girl who had been slicing white bread, put the signs out.

After closing the shop at 8, checking the till, changing from my work uniform into my normal clothes in the locker room, it was 8:20pm.

"Good work today."

The manager always told us it was fine to take home as much of the unsold bread and pastries as we wanted, but I lived alone and there was only so much I could eat. But if I held back too much, it might look as though I thought the bakery's food was awful, which would also be bad. So I said, "I'll just take one," and looked inside the basket of unsold pastries.

"Ah, then you won't take this?"

The manager offered me a paper bag that had been stored on the shelves behind the register.

"It had been set aside as an order for one of our regular customers, but they rang and canceled it not long ago."

"Well, I'll take that then."

I thanked the manager and accepted the paper bag, then punched-out with my time card and left the store. The girl I'd been working with was still choosing a pastry, so I farewelled her with, "I'll see you next time."

I wondered what happened to that blue umbrella. I hurried across the wet and slippery train station floor.

I didn't care whether the rain had stopped or not. What I wanted was for the blue umbrella to still be there.

It had been four hours. It wouldn't be unusual for it to be gone.

Someone without an umbrella could have picked it up, or some kind person could have taken it to the station building or a police box. But that guy won't have returned to pick it up. Of that I was certain.

The umbrella was there. But it wasn't in exactly the same spot. It had moved about a metre. Since it was near the station entrance, that was probably because people had run into it, knocking it over, and then set it back up leaning against the wall. There was also the possibility that someone had borrowed it and then returned it.

At any rate, with my heart thumping, I touched the blue umbrella. I gripped the handle and gently opened it.

Luckily, it was raining lightly. I whispered to the umbrella, telling it that I'd take it to a police box tomorrow, then lifted it over my head and started to walk. Whoever the true owner of the umbrella was, it was surely not that guy from before.

As I left the train station, the man that I had once thought wonderful had become uninteresting. Why had I ever thought he was a good guy?

"I've still got a long way to go, when it comes to picking people."

I said to myself, and smiled. The blue flowers blooming on the umbrella seemed to be giggling with me too.

When I returned to my apartment and opened the paper bag from the manager, I found two raisin-chocolate breads inside. I'd been working there twice a week for about three months, and this was the first time I'd eaten them.

As for what happened to that blue umbrella, it disappeared from my place within the night.

I really had been intending to take it back the following day, but the rain had stopped so I left it out, opened, on my verandah to dry. And the following morning, it was gone.

My apartment's on the second floor, and it's not like it was underwear, so it was hard to imagine a thief taking it. There had been a strong wind that night, so it had probably been blown away.

I hope it bumped into somebody, provided it didn't hurt them.

From time to time I think about that blue umbrella.

I'm sorry I couldn't keep my promise.

Since it would be a miracle, perhaps one has to pray.

That it is returned to its rightful owner, no matter how many years that takes.

* * *

A blue umbrella had fallen onto the street on my path home from school. Lost property should be taken to the police box. I picked it up. It was a bit of a detour from my usual route, but there was a police box on the main street. Instead of following my usual path home, I turned one street earlier, in the opposite direction.

"I wonder if this really is lost property."

Although I'd started out in high spirits, I became a wee bit concerned. After all, the umbrella had certainly fallen, but it was stained with dirt. The frame wasn't broken, but there was a section where the blue material had come loose from the frame and flapped about.

"It could have come from a rubbish bin, or something."

But there weren't any rubbish bins along that road. Especially since the street I picked it up from was in a residential area.

"Ah, whatever."

At any rate, if I handed it to a policeman then my job would be done. It wasn't something I'd been ordered to do, but if pressed, I'd say it was to make the world a better place. When humans find something that's for the good of society, the order to do that comes from within.

However, being an ally of justice was never quite that easy.

"Oi."

Usually, an evil agency was out to block your path.

"..."

Well, that was problematic. Normally, you'd have to deal with a number of underlings first, but today the final boss had suddenly appeared out of nowhere.

"You're from District A, aren't you? Why are you running around in District B?"

I didn't like this kid. Ishimaki-kun was in the same class as me, but he was a thug. Since we were in fifth grade of elementary school, he should have calmed down a bit, but he spent all his time teasing girls, teasing girls and teasing girls. Most of the time, you could substitute my name for 'girls' in that last sentence. But I wasn't about to back down.

"There's something I have to do."

"What is it?"

"What does it matter what it is?"

Does B district belong to you? Do I need your permission to walk here? In my mind I said these things, but they didn't come out of my mouth. I wasn't going to descend to his level to fight him. I, at least, wanted to maintain the composure expected of a fifth-grader.

When I walked on, ignoring him, Ishimaki snatched the umbrella out of my hand.

"Give that back."

"If you want it back, then tell me where you're going."

"No, way."

"Well, I'll just keep this then."

Ishimaki chuckled to himself.

That umbrella wasn't mine. So it was no skin off my nose if Ishimaki kept it. I had a small folding umbrella inside my satchel, so I wouldn't get wet even if it started raining, and when I returned home mom wouldn't ask me about the blue umbrella.

For a moment, I considered turning my back and going home. One turn around the corner and I'd be back on the street I had been on, and back in District A. If Ishimaki followed me, I could ask him, "Why are you running around in District A?"

However.

I felt a prick of pain in my chest.

Ishimaki wouldn't take the blue umbrella to the police box. I would not complete the task I had undertaken. That troubled me.

"Give it back."

I chased after Ishimaki as he ran away. He was undoubtedly pleased by my overreaction.

He left the street and ran across the pedestrian overpass. As someone who is always chosen for the athletics relay, I caught up to him in the middle of the bridge and we struggled for the umbrella.

Thinking that the blue umbrella was under attack from an evil agency, I desperately fought to retrieve it. Ishimaki probably just saw the blue umbrella as a blue umbrella, but having taken it he desperately sought to retain it.

We were both absorbed in what we were doing, and didn't consider how it had come to be like that. But just as I thought, "Ah," the open umbrella fluttered off into the air. That it remained like that and didn't fall onto the road was either a blessing or a curse. No, it was probably a blessing. If it had landed on the road, it may not just have been the umbrella that was damaged – if it had hit a bicycle then both the bicycle and its rider may have been injured too.

The blue umbrella was caught in one of the trees next to the pedestrian overpass. It was close, but not close enough that you could stretch your hand out from the overpass and reach it. On top of that, the tree looked to be completely unsuitable for climbing.

I felt despair, and cried. I wasn't able to protect world peace.

"I'm sorry."

Ishimaki said.

"I'm sorry."

After he'd said it a second time, I shook my head. The final boss had bowed his head. That would probably preserve world peace. But the tears wouldn't stop. Because the umbrella was still stuck in the tree.

"That wasn't mine."

I said to Ishimaki. I opened up to him, and asked what to do next. I told him that I'd come to District B so I could take it to the police box. I said what I'd earlier resolved not to tell him. In this way, I thought I'd gain the wisdom of the final boss.

"Let's call an adult."

The final boss's decision was quick.

"An adult?"

"All we can do here is cry. After all, we're only kids."

Ishimaki took my hand, and led me down off the pedestrian overpass. He looked less like a bully and more like someone trustworthy.

Indeed, I was only a child. The umbrella was only an umbrella that had fallen down, and the world wasn't going to end if it disappeared. That was just something I'd made up.

"If a kite gets stuck on an electric line, you call Tokyo Electric. But who has jurisdiction over the tree branches?"

After I grumbled this, he looked back at me and smiled.

"I dunno, so how about we go to the policeman like you'd planned?"

"Okay."

I was enticed into smiling too.

After explaining what had happened at the police box on the main street of District B, the policeman said, "Let's see what's happened first," and accompanied us back.

But by the time we'd returned, the umbrella was no longer there.

Ishimaki and I searched the surrounding area, but in the end we couldn't find the umbrella, so we spent some time playing in District B's park before going home.

* * *

The blue umbrella appeared before my eyes just as I was regretfully thinking, "I should have at least taken an umbrella when I left."

Technically speaking, the umbrella didn't appear before my eyes. It fell on me from above.

"I'm fine by myself."

I'd left home with that sharp parting remark, and within five minutes it had started raining lightly. If I'd turned left towards the train station when I left, I would have come across numerous shops selling umbrellas, but, unfortunately, I turned right and even the houses became fewer and farther between. It would normally be called a quiet residential neighborhood, but deep inside there's a small wood, of the type where ghosts might appear at night, and small fields were dotted between the houses. The clouds covered most of the sky, so it was dim and gloomy, but thankfully it was still early afternoon. Not yet the time of day when ghosts were likely to be moving around.

With the rain falling on me, I reluctantly ran towards a patch of greenery. It was too early to return home. If I didn't let at least an hour elapse, it wouldn't look good at all.

I knew everyone in the neighborhood back in the rural area where I'd grown up, so at times like this all I'd have to do was call out to someone and I'd be invited back to their house for tea, snacks and idle conversation. Call it

the flavor of Tokyo, or society in general, but I didn't have any nearby acquaintances here. It was kind of sad.

The closest patch of greenery was a grove of mixed trees, containing a shrine to the god Inari. Or probably the other way around. Because the Inari shrine was there, the trees that surrounded it hadn't been cut down. At any rate, thanks to that god, I managed to more or less escape the rain. Soon enough the red torii arch came into view and I realized that the surrounding trees were fewer in number and scarcer in foliage than I had initially thought.

I was regretting it now, and it was too late to do anything about it, but I should have at least taken an umbrella when I left. Just then, a gust of wind blew, and an open umbrella fluttered down on top of me. I didn't even think about it. When the handle came into reach, I grabbed it. Since that's how you use an umbrella.

It was a blue umbrella. With a floral pattern, probably hydrangeas from the looks of it.

I surveyed the area, looking for its owner. But there was no one but me on the path. It must have flown here from somewhere else. It had been carried to me on the wind just now, but before that who knows how many modes of transportation it had taken. The cloth had come unstuck from one of the struts.

"Maybe the god Inari granted my wish for an umbrella."

As a start, I passed through the torii archway, and put my hands together in thanks. In that case, I briefly thought that I should have prayed for something else, but quickly reconsidered – it's not good to be greedy. Things could have gone bad if it had chosen a wicker basket.

Since I had obtained an umbrella, imperfect as it may be, there was no need for me to run around looking for a place to shelter from the rain. I could keep walking around the neighborhood until the residual heat dissipated.

But I didn't do that. My ears picked up a small sound from close by. It sounded more like an 'ahh' than a 'meow.'

"A cat?"

I squatted down and looked along the ground. Beside the shrine to the god Inari there was a cardboard box, and inside that were cats. One, two, ... three cats.

It didn't really happen very often these days, but these cats had undoubtedly been abandoned. Outwardly, I remained calm as I looked down upon this clump of vitality, but inside I was just as surprised as I had been by the umbrella.

Just in case, I had another look around the area, but just like the umbrella's owner, there was no sign of the former owner of these kittens.

"Well then, what to do?"

The kittens hadn't just been born, as their eyes were open. Given their size, they'd probably finished weaning. There was a towel in the box instead of a blanket, but in spite of that they were probably still cold as they huddled together in the corner.

"Left in such a location, I doubt anyone would have noticed them."

While I certainly didn't approve of the dumping of new-born kittens, at least they could have put some more thought into where they left them. But then I tried to think of a better place, and nothing sprang to mind. I considered a main street, that had pedestrian traffic, but then I imagined the kittens getting out of the box and being attracted to the cars, and shook my head.

"Ahh, right."

As usual, the gears in my head don't spin that quickly, but it came to me. There was an animal hospital on the road I'd taken to get here. Talking to the veterinarian there would be the answer. Perhaps they'd be able to search for a new owner.

I retraced my steps. Although I'd called it an animal hospital, it was actually a small, private veterinary. I walked in through the gate, up the three stone steps and turned the doorknob, but the door didn't open.

"Not in?"

There was a notice beside the door. It said the veterinarian was on a training course and not seeing any customers for a week. The address and phone number of an animal hospital in the neighboring suburb was listed in case of emergency, but it was too far to walk and I had neither a phone nor any money, so I returned to the Inari shrine.

The cats were still in the same place as when I left. I squatted down, holding the umbrella over them.

I wanted to pat them, but I didn't. I knew that if I touched them, it would stir up my emotions.

I wanted to keep them, but I probably wouldn't be able to. Since I didn't even know what would become of me tomorrow, I was in no position to act irresponsibly.

"At the very least, I'd like to see you lot get a good home."

What if I took them home, temporarily? From there, could I get them to the animal hospital? Then I remembered that Kazuo had come by car. Kowtowing to her would be annoying, but she might be able to take them to the animal hospital.

Perhaps I saw a bit of myself in those kittens. I wanted to get somewhere warm and be given some milk.

With that decided, I stood up. I tapped my numb feet on the ground a couple of times and started walking, when I spotted a pink umbrella in the direction of the torii.

"Gran."

"Oh my."

When the umbrella was lifted slightly, the face that appeared belonged to my granddaughter, Misa.

"Mom and dad and aunty were all worried about you. Won't you come home?"

"Worried, huh."

"Of course they're worried. That's why we were having the conversation about living together in the first place, right?"

Misa was attending a university in the city. She was Kazuo's daughter.

"I'm fine by myself."

My husband died at the beginning of the year. I thought laying him to rest was all that was required, but it didn't take long for this to happen. They said I should go and live with them because they were worried about someone my age living on her own.

"You don't have to be by yourself though, right? When grandpa was alive, it was the two of you. But you don't want to leave the house that has all of your memories with him. I could see that."

"Maybe you're right. But both your parents and your aunt said they didn't want to move back in to my old, cramped house, so there's nothing that can be done about that."

"Aunty's husband works in Saitama, and they've bought an apartment 20 minutes away from his work."

"And your parents are in the middle of renovating their place."

"Mom's just finished the flower arranging classroom."

So if I were to live with either of them, I'd just be a burden on their household. And it would then only be a matter of time until the house that no-one was living in was put on the market. The house that we'd built from scratch, without any help from our parents, or anything like that. The house that we'd raised two children in.

"That's why I said I'd be fine by myself. I can still take care of myself."

"I suppose. When you put it that way, the next move is difficult."

Misa murmured, then as though she'd just noticed, she said, "Ah, kittens."

"What are they doing here?"

"What are they doing? They've been abandoned. Ah, don't pat them."

But before I could stop her, she'd done just that.

"So cute."

"Aaaah."

"Why can't I pat them?"

"If you get too attached, it makes it even harder to say goodbye."

"You speak from experience?"

"Indeed."

"Did you and grandpa have a cat at some point?"

"Just for a day."

Ever since I was a child, I'd wanted a cat. When I was in primary school, one of my classmates had a cat that gave birth to a litter of kittens, and I thought we could have one of them. But about the same time my older brother said he wanted a dog, and my father granted his request. His reasoning was that the dog could be a watchdog. I pleaded with him, saying that the cat could hunt mice, but he wouldn't listen. Our house didn't have enough mice to warrant an exterminator.

After we'd been married for a while, before we'd had any children but after we'd built the house, I asked my husband about getting a cat. He said that cats were old people's pets, and suggested we get a dog. It wasn't a big deal, but it hurt me and I ran out of the house. It brought back memories of my father getting my brother a dog, and made me far too sad.

I remembered. It hadn't been raining, but back then I'd come here too. My parents lived far away, so I'd had nowhere to go after a matrimonial quarrel either. When my husband found me here crying, he said we could get a cat. The following day, I answered a personal notice in the local paper from someone looking to give away kittens.

"Why just for a day?"

Misa asked.

"Because of your grandpa. He couldn't stop sneezing and crying."

"He was allergic to cats?"

"Yeah, but at the time we didn't use words like that. Your grandpa probably knew about it beforehand. But he was a man of the Showa era. He couldn't say that he had a weakness against cats. And if I wanted a cat so badly that it drove me to tears, then he intended to keep himself under control through sheer willpower."

"And so?"

"What else could I do? Tearfully, I took the kitten back."

While my husband was alive, that was both the first and the last time that I ran out of the house. He had shown he was willing to endure ill-health for my sake, and I loved him all the more for it.

"Gran. What if you kept them?"

"Huh?"

"The kittens. After all, grandpa said that cats were pets for old people, right? From here, you're heading down the highway to old-age, so why not keep them?"

"That's quite an interesting thing you've said, Misa. But even supposing I can look after myself from here on out, I don't know that I could handle a cat too."

Let alone three of them.

"Gran, earlier you said that you could take care of yourself."

Misa said. Indeed, I remembered saying that and nodded. Then she asked once more:

"But I guess adding three kittens would be tiring, right?"

"What are you saying?"

I had no idea where my granddaughter was trying to take this conversation. Probably because of my old age.

"So I'll come and help out, is what I'm trying to say. To take care of the cats."

"What do you mean?"

I was understanding less and less. How could I take these cats with me, when I'd already be imposing on one of my children to stay with them.

"Bit slow, huh? How about I live with you, gran. At your place, with the three kittens."

"Uh."

"Your place is closer to my university than home."

"So I wouldn't have to move out of my place?"

This was a bolt from the blue. I'd mostly given up hope, so was it okay to accept such a lucky opportunity? As I lapsed into silence, Misa looked me straight in the eye.

"My mom and dad persuaded me. Even aunty thought it was better if you didn't live alone ... Or would you rather I not live with you?"

"How could I possibly refuse."

I hastily shook my head.

"You're my one and only darling granddaughter, Misa. Of course I'd be delighted for you to live with me."

"Then it's decided. Let's take these little guys home. I'll take the kittens, so you handle the umbrella, gran."

I nodded, then gave Misa the cardboard box and took her umbrella.

When she saw me close the blue umbrella and stand it up against the torii, Misa said:

"Isn't that your umbrella?"

It seemed she'd only just started to question how I could be holding an umbrella when I'd left the house carrying nothing.

"It was a gift from the god Inari."

"But if it was a gift from the god Inari, shouldn't you take it home?"

"It's fine, I'll leave it here."

I once again joined my hands in prayer, then left the Inari shrine.

"I've already received so much today."

It's not good to be greedy.

A darling granddaughter, and three kittens. And a precious house, packed with memories of my husband.

That was enough for me.

What's with that umbrella.

I was in the center of my studio apartment, drinking warm milk and looking at it.

That evening I'd suddenly received a phone call from my girlfriend Ritsuko, so I flew out of work at the usual time and raced to our appointed meeting place – a cafe at the train station. When I entered, Ritsuko started the conversation with, "Goodbye."

"Huh?"

I was only five minutes later than our agreed upon 6pm. To break up with your boyfriend of two and a half years because of that seemed a bit harsh. When I left the office I'd noticed that it was raining, but I'd endured a soaking as I ran there rather than returning for an umbrella. I considered voicing this complaint, but the reason for her "Goodbye" was obviously unrelated to my tardiness.

"I thought I'd go back to my parent's place."

On the seat beside her was a suitcase, much too large for a short trip. A blue umbrella was hooked over the back of the chair.

"What."

I was a bit relieved. When the waitress came around to take my order, I asked for a blended coffee, then consciously relaxed my posture.

Going back to her parent's place wasn't something Ritsuko did often, but she did do it on occasion. Like for the O-Bon festival, or for New Year's. We were currently in the middle of the rainy season, so about halfway between those two events, but Ritsuko's father had suffered an illness about six months prior and she was probably looking to go home more often.

But in that case, rather than, "Goodbye," she should have said, "I'm heading out, I'll be back." In that case, I could have cheerfully said, "Take care." I would even have helped her carry her heavy suitcase at least as far as the main Tokyo train station.

However.

"This isn't, 'I'm heading out.' This is 'Goodbye.'"

Ritsuko said slowly and precisely, as though admonishing a child who had been insensitive to others emotions.

"I think I've taken care of everything I need to do, and I'm moving out of Tokyo and back to my parent's place in Fukushima."

"Huh?"

"My father's not well, and my mother can't take care of the land on her own. Even though it's such a small field."

"..."

Ritsuko had said it was a small field, but I'd never been to her parent's place so I had no sense of whether that was true or not. My parent's home was in Kanagawa, in a low-density residential area; my father was a civil servant and my mother a housewife.

"I handed in my letter of resignation to my boss last week, and I've emptied my apartment."

Hold on a minute, I held up my hands to stop her. How could she decide something so important without talking to me about it.

"You've moved out then."

I was silenced.

"Cause you've been so busy lately, You-chan."

"I suppose."

I'd been busy with new-hire training, and so on. I hadn't even been to Ritsuko's apartment in the last two months either. But we talked on the phone every couple of days. If she was thinking of returning to her home town, she should have been able to find the ten seconds or so needed to mention it.

"Talking about it wouldn't have achieved anything."

Ritsuko put the straw to her mouth and drank from her iced milk-tea, which was considerably diluted by the melted ice. I wrapped my hands

around my coffee, which had just arrived, and stared at the black liquid inside.

"Well, maybe that's true, but still."

If Ritsuko had decided to return to her parent's home, then I had no right to stop her. Back when we were at university, I was elevated from the position of 'junior' to that of 'boyfriend,' but I was neither her 'husband' nor 'fiance.'

But even so, I was unwilling to give in. Even if Ritsuko returned to her home-town, it's not as though long-distance relationships were unheard of. She didn't have to come to the conclusion that this was 'Goodbye.'

"It would only postpone the question. A long-distance relationship is fine, but how long would that go on for?"

The phrase, "Until marriage," floated through my mind.

"I'm going to take over my parent's farm in Fukushima. Since you've only just started your job in Tokyo, we won't get to spend any time together."

How many times had I said, "I suppose," as I sipped on the coffee. Everything Ritsuko had said was correct, and I was unable to refute her.

And yet I loved her. I still wanted to be with her. But if I said that, then she would ask, "So what do you want to do?" and I had no answer to that.

If Ritsuko were a man and I were a woman, then Ritsuko could have said, "Come with me." And I probably would have answered, "I'll follow you." I don't know.

"So because of all that, goodbye."

Ritsuko stood up. She must have done a quick calculation on the bullet train's departure time and realized she had to go. When she reached for the bill that had been left on the table, I said, "I'll get it." My gesture hadn't been intended as a farewell gift, but that's probably how it came across.

"Thanks. In return, you can take this umbrella."

Ritsuko handed me the umbrella which had been hooked over the back of the chair beside her.

"It doesn't look like you brought an umbrella with you, You-chan. And I can get to Tokyo station without getting wet. Who knows what the weather's doing in Fukushima."

"How should I get the umbrella back to you?"

No matter what, I wanted to remain connected to Ritsuko. I wanted to see her once more, using the umbrella as an excuse. I wanted to stay in touch with her. That's what I was thinking. I believed that if Ritsuko felt the same, that she'd let me return the umbrella to her.

However.

"You don't have to return it."

Ritsuko said.

"Huh?"

"I found it, near the trash, as I was heading out."

Ritsuko explained that she'd inadvertently packed her umbrella in with the rest of her luggage. She'd spotted the blue umbrella just as she was thinking about buying a plastic umbrella from a convenience store. Yesterday had been the collection day for non-burnable trash, but since it hadn't been properly put in the bin, it hadn't been collected. When she'd opened it, she'd seen that it was coming apart a bit, but not to the point that it was unusable. She'd picked it up and brought it here, thinking it would be fine to throw it away once she reached her parent's place.

"When you're done with it, just throw it out on non-burnable trash day."

As I received the umbrella, I thought, "And with that, my last bond to Ritsuko is cut." I sat, facing the blue umbrella and drinking my coffee in the cafe that no longer contained her. When the cup was empty, I took the umbrella and returned to the apartment where I lived alone.

What's with that umbrella.

My final memento of Ritsuko was a tattered umbrella. It was so funny I started to cry.

I opened the blue umbrella, and drank my warm milk.

The blue umbrella was still wet. So that I wouldn't be, it had shielded me from the rain.

Had it been thrown out on trash day, last week? That seemed kind of sad.

Ritsuko wouldn't be gone until the umbrella she gave me was gone. Naturally, I was acutely aware that the umbrella was not Ritsuko. But, somehow, it seemed like a friend to ease me through the pain of a broken heart.

"Right. Fukuzawa Yumi."

I gently stroked the umbrella. Fukuzawa Yumi was the umbrella's name. I hadn't given it that name. It was written on the handle. So I decided to call it Fukuzawa Yumi. It also had Lillian's Girls Academy written there, but calling my friend Lillian seemed a bit embarrassing.

With a name, it stirred even more emotion in me. I pulled on the fabric that had come loose from the frame. It wasn't massively torn. It was just that the thread that kept the fabric attached to the frame had been severed.

"Hold on a minute."

I fetched the lunchbox that served as a sewing kit and opened the lid. It looked like I'd be able to stitch it up with what was in there. I was always better at reattaching buttons than Ritsuko.

"Don't have that though."

The thread I had on hand was white, black, red, pink, and a gray one that I'd bought when a button came off the suit I'd been wearing to job interviews.

"Black and red are out."

I considered what would go better with the umbrella, white or pink, and decided on pink. White would have been less conspicuous, but pink was cuter.

"What should I do?"

As I performed the operation that was closer to attaching a snap fastener than a button, I talked to Fukuzawa Yumi.

"I really love Ritsuko. When she said she'd go out with me, I felt so happy I could die. When I told her this, she said, "You can't die. Let's eat some good food together." She cooked a stir-fry with vegetables that her dad had grown. It was sooo good. Ritsuko wasn't that great a cook – I make a better curry or yaki udon – but her stir-fried vegetables were really spectacular. I wonder if it was her dad's vegetables that made it that good."

After tying a knot and then cutting the thread, I put the needle back into the pincushion and idly looked up at the heavens.

"I guess now, it's her growing those vegetables."

For some reason, I really wanted to eat that. Ritsuko's stir-fry, made with vegetables grown at Ritsuko's parent's farm.

Outside, the rain fell.

The sound of rain was the sound of stir-fry.

The day after I'd been dumped was a Saturday, so thankfully I didn't have to go in to work. I stayed up all night talking to the umbrella and seeking its counsel, and when the sun rose in the east I jumped into bed. When I opened my eyes it was after 3pm, and, as expected, I was hungry. So I went to the convenience store and bought yaki soba, cup ramen and a bread roll with cheese kneaded into the dough.

It was sunny, for the first time in quite a while, but I still took Fukuzawa Yumi with me. Even while I was shopping, I didn't let go of it, carrying it over my arm. I was aware that I was using it as a safety blanket. I had nothing else to cling to. Even if it was just a single umbrella, it was better than nothing.

When I got home, I heated the yaki soba in the microwave oven and ate it.

At eight in the evening, I added hot water to the cup ramen and ate that. I didn't turn on the TV, or the radio, or the computer.

Most of my time was spent solely thinking about Ritsuko.

Occasionally, I'd check my telephone. I stayed inside my apartment the entire time, but Ritsuko could have called while I was in the toilet, and I'd switch the answering machine off then back on, to check it was working. Of course, I was constantly checking my cell phone too.

Fukuzawa Yumi didn't say anything to me.

It'd silently stare at me, waiting until I found an answer.

When the morning came, I shaved for the first time in two days. After shaving, I felt a bit better. Thinking that it would make me feel even better again, I had a shower. Since that made me feel much better, I waited until I'd stopped sweating and put on a suit. And since I'd put on my suit, I thought I might as well head out.

After washing down the bread roll I bought yesterday with some tomato juice from the refrigerator, I headed out, taking only the blue umbrella, my wallet and a handkerchief. After buying a ticket for the bullet train from the nearest train station, I set out for Tokyo station. I had to take the bullet train, since I bought a ticket to Fukushima.

Like that, we were steadily drawn back together.

By the time I arrived in Fukushima station, it was almost three in the afternoon. I'd come to Fukushima thinking that it would cheer me up. If I'd stopped to think about what I was going to do when I arrived, then I know I never would have set out.

But now that I'd stepped off the train and was standing on the platform, I thought about what to do.

Ritsuko was somewhere on this soil. Just thinking about that was enough to make my chest swell. Obviously, I had the option of being satisfied with that and returning to Tokyo. But I didn't feel like settling for that.

I just wanted to hear her voice.

Even if she said, "Go home, I don't want to see you." At the very least, I thought I should phone her.

After I realized that I'd forgotten my cell phone, I searched for a public phone. I found one next to a shop, fed in some coins and punched in her

number. Stupidly, I'd initially dialed the number for Ritsuko's apartment, so, naturally, no-one answered.

I forced myself to calm down. After I'd calmed down a bit, I remembered Ritsuko's cell phone number. I hung the umbrella over the side of a rubbish bin beside me, and pressed the buttons once more. One by one, carefully. Maybe she'd canceled her cell phone contract too. In that case, I'd have to call directory assistance and rely on Ritsuko's surname and address to get that number. After I'd thought of that option, I pressed the final button. After a few seconds of silence, I heard the call being made.

Ring ring, ring ring.

I thought it sounded a bit loud, and rather than coming from the left ear where I was holding the handset, the sound was being picked up by my right ear. The phone of some stranger walking through the station corridor must have coincidentally gone off. I sealed my right ear closed with a finger, and focused on the left ear. It too, had the unmistakeable sound of a call being made.

"... Hello."

The call connected. The voice was Ritsuko's.

"Who is it?"

Since I wasn't calling from home or from my mobile, Ritsuko wouldn't have known who it was. Her voice was clearly on guard.

"It's me."

"You-chan!? What's the matter?"

"Huh?"

I couldn't believe my ears. Why? Because I could hear Ritsuko's voice through my sealed right ear. On that note, what had happened to the ringing phone from earlier? In a daze, I surveyed the area around me.

"Hello, You-chan. What's wrong?"

This time I heard it through my left ear.

No way. No way – .

"Ritsuko, stop moving. No, go back down the corridor you were on."

I hung up the phone. Then I started running in the direction I'd heard that ring-tone coming from earlier.

There I saw Ritsuko walking in my direction, looking incredulous.

"Ritsuko."

I ran towards her, like I was meeting a relative I hadn't seen in twenty or fifty years.

"You-chan!"

When Ritsuko saw me, she started running too. In the middle of the train station hallway, we embraced each other tightly.

"What are you doing here?"

"My father kicked me out, telling me to talk things over with you properly. It was unfaithful of me to unilaterally declare our relationship over. I thought so too. I really regretted hurting your feelings. But I couldn't say, 'Come back to the farm with me.'"

"I know. I know. Don't cry."

I knew. That must have been why I went to Fukushima that day. I hugged Ritsuko tightly as she was soaked by those tears.

It wasn't the time to be worrying about what might happen in the future.

Whatever it took to stay connected to her, that's what I'd do.

For the time being that meant a long-distance relationship, but if we started talking about marriage then I was fine with moving to Fukushima and being her husband.

I'm not that tough a person, so I probably wouldn't be very good at farm work. In that case, I'd be a house-husband, and support Ritsuko.

At that point in time, my head was about to burst with all the thoughts swirling around inside, and I completely forgot about the blue umbrella.

But, even now, I still remember the name 'Fukuzawa Yumi' from time to time.

If I were to say this to Ritsuko, she'd say I was being too hasty, but if we have a daughter I've decided to name her 'Yumi.'

The June bride held a bouquet of hydrangea.

Although, since the color of hydrangeas change, they have the negative connotations of unfaithfulness and fickleness. Since the bride and groom both would have known this, they must have chosen them because they were confident that their love for each other was unshakeable, probably.

And, now, that bouquet is in my hands. Slightly relieved. It wasn't cracking up or anything, but it was probably a bit worn out from fulfilling its important duty as a bride's bouquet. It surely wanted to be put in a vase as quickly as possible, but it's a long way to my place in Tokyo. Both in distance and time.

I, too, was worn out. Doing Tokyo – Fukushima – (Wedding Reception) – Fukushima – Tokyo in a single day wasn't impossible, but it was exhausting.

I thought that, by all rights, I should sleep on the bullet train on the way home, but that wasn't going to happen either.

"Well then."

I fixed my makeup in the mirror of the train station restroom, then headed out. A young man, wearing formal clothes like myself, was waiting there.

"It's only one earlier, but I was able to get it changed."

Saying that, and handing me a ticket for the bullet train, was Nakamori-kun, a classmate of mine from high-school. A friend of the groom, he'd given a speech. I was a friend of the bride, and had manned the reception booth, but when he arrived I hadn't realized that it was Nakamori-kun standing before me until I saw the name on the gift envelope.

The friends of the bride and friends of the groom were seated at separate tables, so we didn't get a chance to talk at all during the reception. I passed on the after-party because I have work tomorrow, and when I headed

for a taxi, Nakamori-kun came running after me, saying, "Mind if I come with you?" He said he was heading back to Tokyo too.

I said, "Go ahead," and settled into the cab. He wasn't a stranger, so it would be odd to refuse.

Just like that, we became traveling companions.

"Guess we don't have time to go to a cafe."

Nakamori-kun flipped over the hand he'd used to give me the ticket and looked at his watch. I pointed to a vending machine using the hand I hadn't received the ticket with.

"Do you want a canned coffee or something? My treat, since you paid for the taxi."

"Ah, I'll have oolong tea then. Thanks."

"Hot? Or cold?"

"Hot."

"Got it."

I raised my hand and headed off to the vending machine by myself.

Five years since graduation, his looks hadn't changed that much but, there was a different atmosphere about Nakamori-kun. During the taxi ride he'd said that his job was in sales, and maybe it was because of that that he was more outgoing, and more talkative than before. He'd been more brooding during high-school. He had a handsome face, but he always looked angry, and his reputation with the girls was not the best.

But, I knew. That it was just that Nakamori-kun was serious. And because he was serious, he would never attempt deceit. He wasn't the kind of person that smiled insincerely, or forced himself to conform with what everyone else was doing, or associated frivolously with others.

"Ah."

The vending machine didn't have hot oolong tea. It had cold oolong tea. And it had hot coffee. Which one to get? I should have asked him what his second choice was. Turning around, I saw that Nakamori-kun was a bit too far away to converse with. Should I go back? Or should I get him something

random? No, this was for Nakamori-kun. He wouldn't appreciate randomness. I could buy one of each, and let him choose, but I wanted hot coffee, not his leftover.

Just as I was thinking about heading back to a place where I could talk to him, I spotted a shop just ahead. Maybe they'd have hot oolong tea there.

"Aota."

As I started to walk off, Nakamori-kun came chasing after me.

"What's the matter?"

"The vending machine didn't have hot oolong tea."

When I explained, he smiled wryly.

"Even after all these years, that part of you hasn't changed, huh."

"That part?"

"Your earnestness."

I didn't know if I should laugh, so I just nodded and kept walking.

Nakamori-kun walked with me. He wouldn't throw me away, saying, "I don't want to be with you anymore."

"Nakamori-kun."

I said, as I slowly walked.

"Way back when, the four of us used to hang out all the time, right."

Myself, Nakamori-kun, and today's leading couple. Myself and Miyochan were best friends, as were Nakamori-kun and Kamata-kun. The four of us would eat together at lunch, go home together, and hang out together on the weekends.

"You and I both knew that those two liked each other. Even before they confessed to each other. But we pretended we didn't, and continued to hang out together. But one day, you stopped, Nakamori-kun."

The delicate two-vs-two balance had been broken, but we didn't become a cheery bunch of three. As though trying to get me to stop hanging around, the other two finally started dating each other seriously.

"I felt I was doing the wrong thing by you, Aota. But I just couldn't take it any more. The way they were using us as an excuse for going so slowly."

I thought that Nakamori-kun had probably liked Miyo-chan. So he couldn't stomach the thought of pretending to just be friends. That's how I interpreted it.

"You were the same too."

I shook my head. I could gloss over it, but I wanted Nakamori-kun to know the truth.

"You know, it didn't really bother me. That they went slowly. Or, rather, I would have been fine with them taking it slowly forever. If it meant they kept inviting us, I wouldn't have minded if they never kissed. Or if it never went beyond that."

Nakamori-kun listened on in silence.

"And yet, they reached the goal-line. They kissed in front of us, at their wedding ceremony."

It was probably due to the passage of time, but my only response upon seeing them kiss in front of me was, "Hmm."

The shop had bottled hot oolong tea. I bought one of those, and a hot coffee for myself.

We were about to head back, when my eyes stopped on an umbrella that was leaning up against the rubbish bin. A blue hydrangea rain umbrella. The reason I stopped and picked it up was probably because it matched the bouquet of flowers I was holding. There was no-one that looked like its owner nearby. Everyone was walking about hurriedly.

My eyes fixed upon something that was written on the handle.

"What's the matter?"

Nakamori-kun came over to take a look.

"It's got 'Lillian' written here. 'Lillian's Girls Academy.' ... That's a surprise."

"Lillian's Girls Academy? Ahh, that rich girl's school? But, why would you be surprised by that?"

"My father's a teacher there."

I felt the umbrella. It wasn't wet. But it hadn't been raining nearby recently either. Maybe its owner had set it down here and then forgotten about it. Well, first of all, was it really 'lost property?' Or was it 'abandoned property?' The more I thought about it, the more confused I became.

"... I wonder if I should take it."

I glanced at Nakamori-kun.

"Regardless of what I say, you've already made up your mind."

Precisely. If I'd left this umbrella here and gone home, it'd probably bother me. At the very least, I wouldn't want it to remain here. I just wanted someone to say that to.

"So, it's fine."

Nakamori-kun muttered. The proper thing was probably to take it to the nearest police box or the train station's lost property office. Even if I took it home, it may not find its way back to the original owner. Therefore, his "That's fine," referred to what was right for me. I was glad of that from Nakamori-kun.

I put my bottled coffee into my handbag, and carried my bouquet of hydrangea and matching umbrella back to the bullet train platform. Walking beside Nakamori-kun, my thoughts returned to our high-school days. Consequently, I wanted to explain to the Nakamori-kun of back then.

"Say, Nakamori-kun. There's probably something you're misunderstanding."

"What?"

"Who it was that I fancied."

"Yomi-chan, right?"

Without a moment's hesitation, he'd hit upon the correct answer and I was stunned into silence, unable to give the response that I'd prepared. But there was no need for that anyway.

"I knew, from watching you."

Even though he'd come up with that answer himself, he was confident in his knowledge.

Right. There was no way that I fancied Kamata-kun. And even though we were both girls, I loved Miyo-chan so much that it blurred the line of best friends. But Miyo-chan got herself a boyfriend, and I wanted an obstruction to stop us from drifting apart.

"And you?"

"Huh?"

"Who do you think I fancied?"

By saying that, he'd implied that it wasn't Miyo-chan.

"Don't tell me, Kamata-kun ... !?"

Playing innocent, although that possibility was slightly less likely, and Nakamori-kun laughed as he refuted it.

"You."

"Huh?"

I'd never even considered that, and was honestly flustered. So much so that I unintentionally stopped walking.

"I ran away because I liked you. I didn't want to lose my best friend, but seeing you smiling in front of them became too painful."

Nakamori-kun took hold of my arm and started walking.

"Because I liked you, I knew who it was that your eyes followed."

I knew he only did that because we'd miss the bullet train if we stopped walking, but even so my heart still beat a little faster.

Even though he was talking about something from long ago.

Holding my arm as we steadily walked onwards, Nakamori-kun brooded. The unsociable teenage boy from back in high-school.

"I'm glad I met you today, Aota."

Nakamori-kun said, without turning around.

"I'm glad I summoned the courage to get in the taxi with you."

"Yeah."

I nodded. As I watched the back of his head.

"I'm glad."

There's just under two hours on the bullet train until we arrive back in Tokyo. Plenty of time to talk.

Inside my handbag, the bottle of coffee made a splashing sound.

The bouquet fluttered with laughter, the umbrella rustled in agreement.

Marguerite Ribbon 9

"I just had a good idea."

Shimako-san clapped her hands together.

"Huh?"

Yumi and Yoshino-san both responded simultaneously.

"An embroidery pattern. That uses all the colors. We've been missing the forest for the trees."

By saying that, she must have meant that the hint had come from somewhere nearby. So the pair started by surveying the immediate vicinity. Since the answer didn't jump out at them, it looked like they'd have to search for it.

"A hint?"

Yoshino-san said, and Shimako-san nodded, stood up from her chair and did a quick spin.

"Okay?"

A hint is generally supposed to be a clue to help you find the answer, but that response from Shimako-san was so cryptic as to be no help whatsoever. Instead, it just added to the confusion.

Shimako-san spun around once.

Shimako-san was a woman, so a pattern of a woman – although it didn't seem to be that simple a hint. For one thing, a pattern of a woman would be quite difficult to sew.

"Shimako Shimako Shimako Shimako Shima."

Repeating her name over and over didn't form any other phrase either.

"We give up."

When the two of them waved the white flag, Shimako-san giggled.

"Oh, was it really that difficult?"

Then she walked over to the garland chrysanthemums that decorated the corner of the room, and pointed to her hair.

"Ah!"

"Marguerite!"

Indeed, the forest for the trees. Or, rather, back to the beginning.

"Right. Marguerite. The petals are yellow and white, and green for the leaves."

"And red?"

Yumi asked, nervously. Earlier, Shimako-san had said, "That uses all the colors." Which meant that the red thread that she had brought should also have a part to play in the design.

"Here, something like this."

Shimako-san selected a red ribbon from those remaining, and wound it around the stem of the flower.

"Tied in a bow."

As they watched on, Yumi and Yoshino-san called out in admiration.

A Marguerite flower bundled in a red ribbon.

See, it's really cute.